

Davita's Harp Short Guide

Davita's Harp by Chaim Potok

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Davita's Harp Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14

Overview

Davita's Harp is one of the few books in the largely masculine tradition of American literature to deal with the quest for female identity. It is also Potok's first novel depicting those issues peculiar to growing up female in the twin patriarchies of both American and Jewish mainstream culture. A reviewer in the Detroit News hailed Davita's Harp as "a warm, decent, generous and patient exploration of important issues facing Jewish women today." It is also a very human account of growing up female in any culture in which women's roles are severely limited; Potok deals with Davita's struggle to find a place for herself as a female in the ritual worship of Jewish orthodoxy and her struggle to gain both a religious and secular education. Particularly poignant is her struggle to find any suitable female role models among all of the failed female lives and heroic male lives she sees. This novel, unlike others before it, deals with the complex identity problem of having a Protestant, a Jewish, and a secular American heritage to draw upon.

About the Author

Chaim Potok was born in New York City on February 17, 1929, on the eve of the Great Depression. His father, Benjamin Max Potok, was a businessman, while his mother, Mollie Friedman Potok, ultimately pursued a graduate school education. Out of his extremely Orthodox Jewish family life—rooted in Talmudic study and the mystical traditions of the Cabala and the Zohor, and always at odds with the prevailing secular culture—Potok developed the materials and themes that have animated all his novels.

Potok graduated *samma cum laude* from Yeshiva University in 1950 with a bachelor's degree. By 1954 he had earned a rabbinical degree from Jewish Theological Seminary. He served as a military chaplain in Korea from 1956 to 1957 and then completed his secular education at the University of Pennsylvania in 1965, graduating with a doctorate in philosophy. As a Conservative rabbi, writer, educator, editor, and military chaplain, Potok brings to his art a deep experience of the traditions of both Judaism and secular Western culture.

Potok's overriding motivation as a writer was sparked early when he read Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited*. His interest in writing met instantly with severe opposition from his family. From reading Waugh's novel, Potok first realized the novel's potential power to remove the reader from one cultural context to another. The result has been that his own novels, perhaps more than any other literary source, have provided readers with a window into the modern world of the European and American Jew. Hence, the novel is Potok's primary tool for "diagnosing" his own modern religious, cultural, historical, and intellectual experience.

Potok's personal interests also include oil painting and photography, both abhorred by his family as foolish pursuits for a Jew with a rabbinical degree.

His persistence has served him well, as is evidenced by the honors bestowed upon him; he was awarded the Edward Lewis Wallant Award and nominated for the National Book Award for both *The Chosen* and *The Promise*.

Setting

This story begins in New York City in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The personal events of the novel are highlighted by such international events as Hitler's rise to power, the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, the Stalin regime, the Russian gulags, the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, World War II, and the shock of the Holocaust.

The intellectual setting, which is more important in this novel than the geographical setting, draws upon such social issues as economic exploitation of the worker, global warfare, social injustice, and the violation of human rights, as well as women's issues. Davita's vision, founded on the New York working class neighborhoods of her early childhood, broadens to the rural New England of her aunt and father's childhood, and finally to Russia, Africa, and Europe. The widening of her geographic and political horizons promotes her subsequent social and moral growth. As she shuttles between the worlds of the Orthodox Judaism of her New York neighborhood and the New England Protestantism of her aunt, Davita establishes a genuine religious vision.

Social Sensitivity

Potok describes the major social and political issues of the 1930s-1940s: socialism and communism in both the United States and elsewhere, the Stalinist terror, the Spanish Civil War, Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, Hitler's rise to power, and the Holocaust all form the historical backdrop of Davita's world.

The social situation of world Jewry forms another dominant theme with the inclusion of the character Jakob Daw.

But the social issues relevant to American Jewry form the foreground of the novel and dominate its themes, characters, and setting. The Orthodox Jewish position on the role of women in ritual worship and religious education is a major theme of this novel. The tensions between the secular world and the religious world of the Jews form another.

Of particular interest to Potok is the relative value of several different forms of social and political consciousness.

Jewish, secular, and Christian modes of involvement with human rights violations are represented by Michael Chandal, journalist and Socialist; Aunt Sarah, Christian nurse; Channah Chandal, agnostic Communist activist; Jakob Daw, Jewish writer; and Ezra Dinn, Orthodox Jewish immigration attorney who rescues Jews fleeing Stalinist Russia. Each in turn displays an intense moral commitment to human rights issues, teaching Davita the value of the individual and the need to fight to keep that knowledge alive. She also learns that the cost of caring can be death, as with her father in Guernica; exile, as in the case of Jakob Daw in anti-Semitic Europe; disillusionment, as with her Communist mother's initial commitment to Stalinism; or frequent social and religious exclusion in her own case.

Literary Qualities

Davita's Harp is a book about storytelling and the nature of stories themselves. Potok structures the plot around numerous inset stories that Davita learns from her parents, Jakob Daw, Aunt Sarah, books, and newspapers. The careful placement of each story reinforces the themes presented in the outer framework of events. Through each puzzling or frightening new tale, Davita gradually fuses together her emotional inner life and the world of external events. Davita's growing ability to relate stories to life and to use them in the creative processes of her own imagination and soul marks her progressive maturation and self-identification both as a young woman and as a budding artist.

Drawing strongly upon the forces of historical realism and mythology, Potok weaves the aura of dream shattered by nightmare to enliven what might otherwise be a dull social document. Through the use of symbols such as the door harp that accompanies each of Davita's geographic and emotional moves, Potok develops his primary themes of imagination, hope, and continuity in the novel.

Inset stories and recurring symbols lend texture to the novel and substance to the imagery.

Most of the narrative is written in the third-person, but many passages employ a disjointed stream-of-consciousness technique to evoke the emotional trauma and social fragmentation that result from such events as Michael Chandal's death, Jakob Daw's fate, Davita's recovery from her suicide attempt, and her perceptions of her mother's nervous collapse. The thirdperson narrative is broken only by these passages and by occasional passages of quasi stream-of-consciousness, in which experiences belonging to the mystical and imaginative worlds are related.

Potok's sensitive and effective prose style in this novel befits the treatment of the inner life of the imaginative child and the interplay of imagination and reality.

The flexible and literary style alternates moments of poetic vision with social realism. The prevailing tone of the novel is elegiac and nostalgic as Davita penetrates the pain of the adult world and the binding yet often uplifting traditions of the Jewish fathers. Potok's prose reveals the manner in which Davita knits up all the pieces of her past and present.

Themes and Characters

Potok's deep acculturation in Judaism animates his life-affirming belief in the individual, in society, in the human quest for meaning, and in the magnificently human capacity for self-sacrifice. Like many American Jewish writers, he refuses to espouse the popular modernist philosophy of alienation. He embraces instead a vision of the enduring, the generous, and the good in humankind.

His novels excel at depicting numerous Jewish customs and beliefs: family psychology, religious ritual and scholarship, the role of the male, the "place" of the woman, the influence of the Jewish European heritage, reactions to the Holocaust, attitudes toward Zionism, and the impact of materialistic America upon the Orthodox Jewish family. Above all, he provides a universally relevant account of the young adult's age-old quest for self-identity forged from the inevitable clash between personal impetus and parental injunction.

Central to an understanding of this clash is Potok's account, related in several interviews, about the anger he experienced as a young man upon discovering how powerfully Jewish tradition denounces the works of the imagination as inferior to feats of Talmudic scholarship, not to mention the almost violent opposition of the Orthodox Jewish community to the Jew as either artist or novelist.

When the story begins, Davita is a very young child living with her parents in a series of New York apartments. Her father, Michael Chandal, is a reporter for a leftist newspaper who, in the course of the story, becomes a well-known journalist. An Episcopalian from New England, he meets Davita's mother Channah, a Jewish immigrant from Poland, in New York, where they are drawn together by their commitment to communism. Because Michael and Channah, who is often called Annie, are nonreligious political activists who frequently hold loud meetings at their apartments, they are forced to move frequently, and Davita grows up in a loving but hectic environment.

In time, Davita learns more about her parents' beliefs and friends. One friend who deeply influences Davita is Jakob Daw, an Austrian writer who is very close to Channah. When he visits the family in New York, he tells Davita beautiful, strange stories, and he continues to write about these stories in his frequent letters to her after he leaves New York. Another important influence is Aunt Sarah, Michael's sister and a deeply religious Christian nurse. When Channah is ill and Michael goes overseas, Aunt Sarah takes care of Davita; she also tenderly nurses Davita back to health after her suicide attempt.

Davita has exceptional intelligence, artistic vision, scholarly aptitude, and understanding of social idealism. Through her courage and intelligence she manages to survive her parents' political and personal crises, the unsympathetic anti-Communist neighborhoods from which the family is repeatedly evicted, the growing shock of a disintegrating Europe, anti-Semitism, and a wellmeaning but frequently insensitive local Jewish community. Potok gives wonderful insights into the psychological effects children

experience when their parents' fervent political activism prevents them from tending to their child's emotional needs.

The emotional trauma Davita experiences from her father's death and her mother's nervous collapse affect her severely, as does the growing knowledge of her mother's loss of faith in Stalin and subsequent reentry into the world of traditional Judaism. There is evidence that some of these events stem from Potok's own childhood and from his wife's childhood. Particularly insightful is the very human account of Davita's attempted suicide, her subsequent emotional withdrawal, her long illness and recovery, and her ultimate discovery of her own courage and her unique capacity for independent thought and action. Davita becomes fully aware of the world's injustices and cruelty, the social barriers denying women full equality, and the fate of the European Jewish community, yet she maintains her belief in herself and human goodness. Above all, she finds herself able to trust others and capable of forming a loving friendship. David Dinn, a Jewish boy Davita meets at the beach, becomes her good friend, and eventually her stepbrother when his father Ezra Dinn, an immigration lawyer, marries her mother. Empowered by the love of her family, and the creative forces of her own imagination and personal religious vision, Davita achieves young womanhood whole and clear-eyed.



Topics for Discussion

1. Davita's door harp, which hangs on the back of the door in each of the apartments the family occupies, is clearly the central symbol in the novel. What qualities, hopes, and promises are invested in this symbol?
2. What does Potok achieve thematically by contrasting and comparing the respective social consciousnesses of Channah and Michael Chandal as Communists, Ezra Dinn as an Orthodox Jew, and Sarah Chandal as a Christian humanitarian?
3. What are the peculiarly difficult growth and maturation tasks faced by young Jewish women of Davita's circumstances during the 1930s and 1940s? Consider the difficulties faced by any young woman at any point in time.
4. How does Davita reconcile her Jewish, Christian, and secular American heritage?
5. Do you think Potok believes the world political scene is beyond help or that individuals are capable of defeating social evils such as war and anti-Semitism?
6. What crises of identity does Potok's Jewish woman protagonist face that his Jewish male protagonists will never have to negotiate?
7. What are the highest human values Potok holds up in his novel? In whom are they embodied?
8. To what extent does Potok locate social evil nationally and geographically? Does he blame Americans for social injustice and the violation of human rights?
9. Of what particular importance is the family in Potok's scheme of things?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Show which women in the novel derive their primary identity from the men with whom they are associated and which women achieve self-identity.

2. Study the inset stories within the novel and decide what each adds to the ongoing themes within the larger story.

Pay particular attention to the stories of Jakob Daw and Channah Chandal.

3. In many ways this novel is a child's lament for the loss of both mother and father, even though the mother does not die. Discuss the stages of loss, abandonment, and grief experienced by Davita.

How does she regain her "lost" mother and reconcile herself to the death of her father?

4. Describe the experiences and characteristics Davita displays that make her very different from most children who grow up in twentieth-century America.

5. List the central conflicts between Jewish and non-Jewish culture described in the novel, and explain the reasons for these differences.

For Further Reference

Benjamin, J. C. "The Novels of Chaim Potok." *Jewish Quarterly* 29 (Summer/Autumn 1981): 19-21. This article discusses earlier Potok novels in terms of theme, style, character, and social issues and provides useful background reading on Potok.

Forbes, Cheryl. "Judaism Under the Secular Umbrella." *Christianity Today* (September 8, 1978): 14-21. In this interview, Potok explains what happens when Jewish and Christian values and cultures come into contact with one another.

Kremer, Lillian S. "A Conversation with Chaim Potok." In *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook: 1984*, edited by Jean W. Ross. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. Contains information about Potok and his influences, sources, themes, and major works of fiction and nonfiction.

Moritz, Charles, ed. *Current Biography Yearbook: 1983*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983. A quick reference source for information about Potok and his previous works.

Studies in Jewish American Literature 4 (1984). This special issue contains articles by major scholars of Jewish American literature. Of particular interest is Dan Walden's "A Zwischenmensch [an in-between person] in the Cultures," and Joan Del Fattore's "Women as Scholars in Chaim Potok's Novels."

Related Titles

Potok's previous novels, such as *The Chosen*, *The Promise*, *In the Beginning*, and *My Name Is Asher Lev*, all feature Jewish protagonists and are clearly derived from the tradition of the male bildungsroman, which treats the maturation of the male from adolescence to young manhood. *Davita's Harp* represents Potok's first experiment with a female point of view and the novel of female growth and development. Read in the context of his earlier novels, *Davita's Harp* reveals Potok's tendency to contrast female madness, female suicide, and female emotional instability with male self-possession and heroics, a literary practice that threatens to relegate the female characters of *Davita's Harp* to some of the more questionable female stereotypes of the Victorian novel. But his novels contain a genuine effort to penetrate the female Jewish psyche and map its emotional rites of passage and social constraints.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress

Cataloging-in-Publication Data



Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994