Dear Elijah Short Guide

Dear Elijah by Miriam Bat-Ami

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

Dear Elijah Short Guide....................1
Contents....................2
Overview....................3
About the Author....................4
Setting....................6
Social Sensitivity....................7
Literary Qualities....................9
Themes and Characters....................10
Topics for Discussion....................13
Ideas for Reports and Papers....................14
For Further Reference....................15
Copyright Information....................16

Overview

Passover is coming and Rebecca Samuelson's father likely will not be at home for it. A devout man, he has always taken charge of the preparations for Passover, and Rebecca is unsure of how her family will fare without him. His absence for Passover is symbolic of his absence in Rebecca's day-to-day life, and she feels a need for his reassuring presence, not only as someone to consistently provide a comforting continuity to her life but as someone she can rebel against as she begins her search for self-identity. She is beset by anxiety as she changes from child to young woman, and her father's illness makes her even more desperate for reassurance and relief from her insecurity.

She turns to the prophet Elijah for help. Author Bat-Ami offers a brief explanation of how Elijah figures in Jewish tradition before she begins the novel, pointing out that he is a mystical figure, at once powerful and human. During Passover, he is supposed to visit a home and drink some wine.

With Passover approaching and her father near death in a hospital, Rebecca asks Elijah for help. She does this by writing letters to him which express her thoughts, her difficulties in life, her dreams about him, and her thoughts on how they might relate together. The narrative consists of Rebecca's letters, sometimes infrequent, sometimes more than one a day; the novel is an exploration of a twelve-year-old girl's effort to comprehend herself and her place in the world. There is little action but much perplexing thought for protagonist and reader, and Rebecca's painful process of maturing faster than she would prefer is honest, revelatory, and sometimes profound.

About the Author

Miriam Bat-Ami's father was a Conservative Rabbi and her mother was a Julliard graduate in violin. Bat-Ami grew up in a home filled with spiritual concerns and music. Although always a writer, she at first wrote for herself and not for an audience. She attended Boston College for a year before transferring to Hebrew University in Jerusalem where she earned her B.A. in 1974. She then traveled through Israel and the United States for several years, working at a variety of jobs that included selling jewelry, guiding tours at the Israeli Museum, clerking at a clothing store, typing interrogatories at a law firm, accounting for a travel agency, and serving as an executive assistant at the Israeli consulate in Los Angeles.

In 1978, she began attending California State University, Los Angeles, where she earned her M.A. in 1980.

She took a job teaching primarily children's literature and writing at Southwest Missouri State University. She credits this teaching experience with encouraging her to write for young people; had she primarily taught Shakespeare, her principal academic interest, she might not have shifted from writing fiction and poetry for herself to writing fiction and poetry for a young audience. She continued her studies and eventually earned her doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, with an emphasis in Shakespeare. With that degree she took a job at Western Michigan University, where she is now an associate professor. She is presently married with two boys, "two dogs, two birds, and two cats" (all the quotations in this section are from personal correspondence).

Bat-Ami credits editor Harold Underdown, then with Macmillan and now with Charlesbridge Publications, with helping her learn to write for children by working her through the 4544 Dear Elijah process of preparing a picture book Sea, Salt, and Air for publication. She has found that writing for young people—especially the writing of Dear Elijah—has not only involved the exploration of her inner life but has drawn her out of herself to consider the interests and needs of her audience: "When you write for children and adolescents, you still write from and for the self; but you tend to find yourself dually operating as parent and child." Like other authors for young people, she believes that she still sees the world in childlike ways: "I don't think I ever left adolescence entirely behind me. I still ask the same questions that adolescents ask . . ."

Bat-Ami believes herself to still be in the process of learning to write for an audience.

With that goal in mind she wished to attend an expensive course in writing for young people, the Highlights Children's Workshop in Chautauqua, but did not have the money to pay her way. To earn a scholarship to the workshop, she wrote a short story "Elijah and Me" about the Passover Seder. It earned the scholarship. The short story was revised as a picture book, but on the advice of an editor, who thought the themes too complex for younger children, Bat-Ami expanded the story to explore Rebecca's relationship with Elijah, adding the plot element of Rebecca's father's illness—inspired by the recent sudden death of Bat-Ami's own father. The resulting novel found a

publisher— Farrar, Straus and Giroux— on the second try, and after a favorable critical reception the paperback rights were sold to the publisher, Jewish Publications Society, that had first rejected the book. Selling the novel to the secular publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux involved a few minor changes to the story such as changing a game of Aleph-Bet—a game in Hebrew—to War, a simple game that shows off the playful side of the Elijah of Jewish tradition.

Setting

The territory of Dear Elijah is the remarkable search-for-self in Rebecca's mind, and this turbulent inner life is depicted with a compassionate gravity that gives the novel universal appeal for young readers. Even adults will recognize in Rebecca's plight their own difficult struggles to understand the unreasonableness of life and death. Rebecca's mind conducts an extended correspondence among Elijah, God, and her family. She chooses to write to Elijah the Prophet because she finds God intimidating. The Elijah of Jewish tradition is a man with mystical powers and, being human, seems easier to converse with than God.

Rebecca imagines playing games with Elijah, confiding in him, asking him for advice, asking him for help, and joking around with him. She even becomes irritated with his sense of humor. Much of the power of the narrative comes from the irony of Rebecca's interaction with Elijah; he is a father figure—"sometimes you look a little like my dad, but you're not him.

You're someone I can talk to." Her father is a remote personality, separated by a piety that she shares yet rebels against. Even so, when she speaks of Elijah's influence on her, her relationship to her father can be sensed: "sometimes, Elijah, I can feel you inside of me or across from me or speaking out across eternities of sand."

There is an exterior landscape that figures in Rebecca's writings to Elijah, one common to urban and suburban America, with schools, homes, and stores. The most important place is the part of the home in which Passover will be observed, where the table is set that holds the glass of wine that Elijah will come to drink. Here, in the past, Rebecca's father governed the observance; Rebecca would open the front door to let Elijah in. There is school, a dull place where Rebecca is expected to memorize facts; her father's illness is apparently known to those at school and "everybody expects me to be a poor performer these days." The deli where the family buys some of its Passover preparations stands out as a friendly place where Rebecca loves the pickles.

Social Sensitivity

Rebecca asks tough questions about her faith, her family, and her society.

"Elijah, don't you think God has better things to do than check up on how I'm breaking the rules?" She wonders about rules—whether they define a person or interfere with a person's living a good life. Is her faith defined by rules? If so, which rules are the right ones? She regards her father as a strict observer of Jewish religious laws, yet notes that she knows of families where the laws are even more strictly followed than in her own. Are those families closer to God? She does not find answers to such questions, but they are more than just expressions of her rebellious efforts to define herself as an individual human being; they are problems that may reasonably be asked of religious life and society in general. Exactly what are the right rules to follow?

Dear Elijah has much to teach readers unfamiliar with Jewish religious practices. Rebecca reveals many details of the Jewish faith through her efforts to define herself; but by focusing closely on her problems preachiness is avoided; the texture of spirituality is unobtrusively present in the words she writes. For instance, when she says, "I'm deep-down Jewish, Elijah. But I don't want Dad being there all the time, making me remember," she indicates her degree of commitment to her religion, but she maintains the tone of a twelve-year-old who, like millions of other twelve-year-olds, wants to loosen some household rules and free herself a little from the strictures of adults: "I want to be Jewish, Elijah. I am Jewish. But what would happen if I stopped being very religious?"

Some of Rebecca's religious questions are very challenging, and young readers (adults, too) may well echo them. An adult may then have a challenging discussion ahead. For instance, Rebecca remarks, "Somehow it's hard for me to imagine that there are separate heavens, like one for Jews and one for non-Jews." For Jews, this opens up a very difficult set of theological issues: What is Heaven? Is there a Heaven? What happens to good non-Jews when they die? For non-Jews, the questions can be just as nettlesome. The very concept of Heaven is controversial, and who gets to go there is even more controversial.

These questions could by frustrating for young people looking for plain answers, but it is crucial to intellectual growth to understand that many difficult questions have only unclear answers—that often the question is more important than its answer. In Rebecca's case, her question reveals her awareness that other people—some of them intelligent, inquisitive, and wellmeaning—may not share her beliefs. It also indicates an understanding of the worthiness of others who do not share her faith. Instead of being just a rebellious and petulant question, it actually shows that Rebecca is developing a concern for others and an awareness of the complexity of the larger society she will have to live in later on. It bodes well for her spiritual growth and suggests that she is becoming a caring, thoughtful, and good person.

Rebecca has her share of family problems, some of which she admits she deliberately creates, such as when she breaks a religious rule that her father wants her to follow. Her little brother is an irritating pest who declares that he actually saw Elijah drinking the wine during Passover.

This prompts a small crisis for Rebecca— why, she asks Elijah, is her brother allowed to see him but she is not?

Her sister seems to belong to a different world of girls, one Rebecca does not wish to join. These commonplace problems are exacerbated by more profound fears and confusions. "I don't want a mother who is a mother and a father," she tells Elijah. Whatever her rebelliousness, she recognizes in herself a need for her father, a yearning to have him back home to provide the security she had as a child. "I am asking you to help my father, E.," she asks in one of the more moving passages of the novel.

Much of the novel's universal appeal stems from Rebecca's typical twelve-year-old attitudes as she tries to sort out her life. She announces, "In case you didn't know, Mr. Big Cheese Eliyahu Ha-Navi, this whole world is full of fakes." Her teachers bore her; other kids may be dull; honesty seems hard to find. These typical attitudes in the novel are anchored in her family, in which father and mother, brother and sister represent aspects of society to be rebelled against. The implication is that the solutions to the alienation Rebecca endures may be found in the family. She implicitly acknowledges this every time she wishes her father home and healthy. The novel's conclusion emphasizes the family's central importance to security, self-worth, and social understanding: Rebecca's mother and family succeed in pulling together a Passover observance without the father. Crucial to the success of the event are adults whom Rebecca had found very annoying guests at previous Passover observances. These "fakes" bring good cheer and good company and reveal the wider social group that may help a family—and a girl—survive hard times. Rebecca even discovers why some rituals exist and why they are good to follow: "And then, as it does every year, Passover enters through our ears. We hear our voices saying the prayers. Passover enters through our noses: we smell matzo balls and chicken soup and roast turkey. Passover enters through our mouths. We can even feel it in our bones." In the absence of her father, Rebecca finds a father in her religion; this is significant for her personal growth, because she learns that she can survive, as some day she must, without her father—that her heritage provides nurturing, guidance, and security.

Literary Qualities

Dear Elijah consists of a series of letters written to the prophet Elijah by Rebecca, who needs to talk to an understanding person about troubling and painful events in her life, especially her father's serious illness. This is an unusual narrative approach in books for young readers, but it is highly effective for exploring the mental and spiritual landscape of a protagonist. The action of the novel is the action of a mind wrestling with problems and seeking answers to questions about the self; there is little outer action. Even so, the novel has much to appeal to readers. Part of it is educational; Jewish religious beliefs are presented as integral parts of the story and would be of interest to many non-Jewish readers. The mystical aspects of Passover should be especially elucidating. Rebecca is also an engaging and fun person for the reader to spend time with. Her humor is flippant but intriguing since it is put in the service of serious enquiry for selfknowledge. She uses basic but enduring personal traits, such as humor, to cope with her crisis of spirit, traits that would be of interest to anyone trying to understand some of the toughest problems life has to offer.

Of considerable interest is how Rebecca uses an art form to express and explore her emotions. This writing is not only a way to discover herself but a means to figure out what events concerning her mean for her and others, and she notes that "when I write, I can hold on." The artistic expression of her inner self helps her to endure aspects of life that she is unable to change. Bat-Ami is not heavyhanded about any of this; it is organic to the narrative. One of the key aspects of Rebecca's writing is that it is not just intended for herself alone but it has been partly composed for a specific audience. Since she is trying to explain what she has experienced to Elijah, she must put her thoughts in order as if someone else had to understand them. This process of ordering her thoughts helps her to understand herself. This aspect of the novel alone would make it exceptionally fine because it illustrates how one of the arts may figure in an important way in a young adult's emotional and intellectual life.

Themes and Characters

Bat-Ami remarks in a letter: "Difficult occurrences can move a character into the mystical [plane] easily, and so Rebecca's father's illness does that for her." Rebecca has grown into the world of questions, confusions, and challenges that mark the passage from childhood to young adulthood. The family crisis of her father's need for a heart operation triggers her effort to settle many of the problems and questions before her by communing with God. Having found praying to God difficult, she writes to the lessspiritually-remote Elijah to try to work her way through tormenting personal issues such as her relationship to God, her relationship with her father and family, and her sense of low self-worth.

Dear Elijah is Rebecca's account of how she grows as she deals with her personal and family crisis. Much of her growth is dependent on her religious faith. She believes in God and she believes in Elijah, who makes his appearances through Rebecca's imagination. Judaism gives him mystical powers and a playful disposition, both qualities that appeal to Rebecca. He plays with her, banters with her, and gives her enigmatic answers to her questions. As the novel evolves, Rebecca's understanding of Elijah becomes increasingly complex. He becomes at once prophet, father, conduit to God, teacher, playmate, confidant, and trickster. These aspects of Elijah also take form in Rebecca, although she is not always aware of how she is transforming herself as she works her way through fear and grief.

As she talks to Elijah, she discovers inner resources for coping with hard times.

Even though Rebecca has a very serious side to her personality—" Twelve is an awful age. You're too young to do all the things you want to do, and too old to get out of all the things you don't want to do."—she also has an engaging sense of humor. If Elijah can be playful, then so can she, as when, early on, she asks about his chariot: "Does it need an annual chariot checkup and wash?" She can also be simultaneously serious and humorous, as when she asks, "If you live forever, do you ever get old and senile?" Asking about the universal human concern of aging is at once a serious matter and a ridiculously playful one, since Elijah, who lives forever, seems both a profoundly serious prophet who visits at Passover and a playful mystic who will play games.

"When you cry, you can't think straight. I like to think straight," says Rebecca. She tries to understand her feelings and learn about herself through the act of writing out her feelings. For one, she prefers straight thinking to confusion and therefore resists crying. As she deals with her family's tension, she discovers, "I must have a very strong heart, the way it keeps bursting." Here, she learns that she can feel very strong emotions and survive; she discovers some of the inner strength that will carry into adulthood. Her capacity to endure is reflected in "E., it seems like I'm always scared now." Her quickening awareness of her father's mortality brings fear for him with it, and also some understanding of her father.

According to Rebecca, her father is a strict disciplinarian, although her remark, "You have to be perfect around him all the time" might seem more suggestive of a twelve-year-old's immature view than of how an adult might view her father. But this novel is realistic, and Rebecca is twelveyears-old, and she does find that her father's strict religious views impede her efforts to establish independence.

Even so, her view of her father is complex, reflecting her thoughtfulness.

"MY FATHER IS SUPPOSED TO PROTECT ME, E. HE IS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE SICK," she asserts. The little girl part of her still yearns for the father who has been comfortingly dependable. His strictness includes careful attention to his family, and she misses his solacing presence. But the reassuringly strong man is gone; Rebecca's father is now wasted away, too frail to risk an operation on his heart. He is hospitalized in order to regain enough strength to endure the operation; Rebecca visits him and finds herself profoundly moved—she wants his reassurance but instead finds herself a comfort to him.

With her father's incapacitation, Rebecca arrives at a deeper understanding of her mother. Some of this understanding is a mixture of sympathy and alarm: "A person asks my mother about Dad, and she freezes."

Rebecca's mother is having trouble coping, but she manages to keep her household together as she assumes the responsibilities of her husband in addition to her own. Through Rebecca's eyes, her mother is somewhat enigmatic, a mysterious figure who keeps much of what she thinks and feels to herself. Even so, Rebecca finds much in her to respect. "No one fools Mom," says Rebecca.

Sibling rivalry is evident in the relationships among the family's children.

Rebecca is given to study and introspection, even though she seems to be the most rebellious of the three. Her brother is younger and given to competing with Rebecca for attention, which evokes some jealousy in Rebecca. His assertion that he saw Elijah may be as much an effort to annoy her as to assert his childlike connection to his religious faith. Rebecca's relationship with older sister Fanny is more complex. According to Rebecca, "Fanny's unconscious mind is just consumed by dreams of power." Fanny seems to be forever bossing Rebecca around and putting on airs as the more mature girl. Her adolescent interests in clothes and boys irritate Rebecca because Rebecca's interests are heading elsewhere—into the arts such as writing and into religious introspection. Neither of the siblings is fleshed out much, as one might reasonably expect from a twelve-yearold writer who usually finds them annoying rather than helpful. Still, they form a part of the family whose presence is comfortingly familiar during Passover.

This novel has complex themes which are sure to challenge readers of all ages. Outstanding among them are the themes of religious faith, family crisis, and art as a tool for self-discovery. Although Rebecca has many defiant, even subversive, questions about her faith, she never doubts the existence of God. Her letters to Elijah are also

faithful to the fundamental traditions of Judaism. She uses her faith to help articulate her anxieties and to create an intellectual foundation for understanding the capriciousness of events that have thrown her life into disorder. The religious theme is bound up in the family crisis, because her father is largely defined by his profound religious faith. He is a man who follows Jewish observances and who worships in traditional ways; when he is struck down by a terrible illness, the articles of his faith inevitably call attention to themselves, if for no other reason than the obvious question of why a devoutly religiously man would be allowed by God to suffer. Rebecca very reasonably sees her father's, and consequently his family's, suffering as tied to the family's relationship to God. Her letters to Elijah in part seek to understand the man of faith and the family's crisis, as well as the nature of religious faith.

The themes of religious faith and family crisis are bound to the theme of art as a tool for self-discovery. Rebecca, by putting her thoughts into writing, seeks to objectify and distance her feelings enough so as to be able to understand them more clearly. She asks Elijah to look at her writing and to advise her; this process engages her own mind in the task of formulating answers to the questions her feelings pose to her. Bat-Ami says that "Rebecca's correspondence with the prophet was a way for her to find self; that, as she becomes more and more intimate with him, she discovers what she needs." Therefore acts of self-expression become acts of understanding for Rebecca as she seeks knowledge of herself and those who figure in her life.

Topics for Discussion

1. Rebecca mentions having to memorize material in school. What good is memorization? Is it possible to think without knowing the facts?

2. What aspects of school does Rebecca seem to like better than memorizing and lecturing? Why would she like it better?

3. Why does Rebecca deliberately break rules? When she breaks a religious rule, is she being sacrilegious?

4. Why would Rebecca wonder whether anything she had done would make God hurt her father?

5. What does Rebecca mean when she says that "when I write, I can hold on"?

6. When Rebecca says that "this whole world is full of fakes," to whom does she refer? Is she correct?

7. Is the Passover celebration at the end of the novel a happy one or a sad one?

8. How well do the Samuelsons cope without the family's father?

9. Why does Rebecca write letters to Elijah?

10. What about Judaism did you learn from reading Dear Elijah?

11. What effect does making Elijah good-humored have on his characterization? How does it affect the narrative?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the customary observances for Passover? Are there variations in the practices among different groups of Jews?

2. Who is Elijah? What scriptural texts mention him? What did he do that makes him special? What is his role during Passover?

3. What are the origins of the traditions surrounding Elijah?

4. What kind of heart operation does Rebecca's father need? What preparation of the patient is needed before the operation? What are the father's chances for survival?

5. Religion seems to be an affair involving all members of Rebecca's family. What would traditionally be expected of the father? What would traditionally be expected of the mother? What would traditionally be expected of each of the children?

6. What other novels are told through letters? Are there any intended for young adults? Why are they told in letters? Do they have themes similar to those in Dear Elijah?

7. Dear Elijah has many humorous moments. What are some of them?

What makes them humorous?

8. Identify some of the typical problems with growing up faced by twelve-year-old girls? Which are felt by Rebecca? Is Bat-Ami realistic in her portrayal of these problems? (To begin research for this topic, you may wish to consult a book on child development.)

9. What is the Jewish view of Heav en? Do views of Heaven vary among Jews?

10. What is the Shabbes Queen?

Where does she come from? What does she do?

11. What is Succoth? Why is it celebrated? How is it observed?

12. How important are rules for religion? How important are rules for families?

For Further Reference

"Dear Elijah." American Bookseller (March 1995): 27-28. Praises the novel, especially the "prose that at times illuminates the page like a passing comet."

Frischer, Rita Berman. "Why Are These Books Different?" Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles (March 31April 6, 1995). Praises Dear Elijah as a help to young people who are learning to deal with the unpredictability of life.

"Has This Ever Happened to You?: Stories about Us." The Reading Teacher 50,1 (September 1996): 58-59.

"Readers will identify with Rebecca's thoughts and emotions as she struggles to sort out events in her life."

Kaplan, Sybil. "The Best Books of 1995." The Speaker (December 1995): 10. Kaplan says, "The book is clever, and it touches upon very real events that happen to young people."

Korman, Becky. VOYA (August 1995): 154. Korman summarizes the plot, suggests that the diction of Rebecca's letters is sometimes too adult, and praises the book as "a good source of information on Judaism and the Passover celebration." She remarks that "Even though many of Rebecca's questions deal with the Jewish faith, the issue of whether to adopt your parents' beliefs is one that most young people will face."

BOOKRAGS

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 Baziotes 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