

The Devil's Arithmetic Study Guide

The Devil's Arithmetic by Jane Yolen

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Plot Summary

In Jane Yolen's novel, *The Devil's Arithmetic*, a girl from a Jewish family in New Rochelle, New York, finds herself magically transported to a village in Europe during World War II. The villagers, all Jewish, are taken by Nazi soldiers to a concentration camp. During the course of the story, many of the characters are sent to the gas chambers, "chosen" for death by the camp commandant. The girl, Hannah Stern, slowly begins to lose memory of her life and family in New Rochelle, as the terrifying events of her new life increasingly take over her consciousness. Her initial suspicion that she is in an elaborate dream gradually gives way to the grim reality of the camp. There, her name is Chaya Abramowitz, but even that is taken away by the Nazis, who tattoo the arms of all the prisoners with identification numbers. Hannah and her family are helped at the camp by a girl named Rivka whose own family has been killed by the Nazis over the past year in the camp, except for one brother, named Wolfe. Rivka teaches the others tricks of survival in the camp, but not everyone will listen to her. Hannah follows Rivka's advice. Occasionally, Hannah briefly recalls something from school about the Nazi atrocities. She tries to warn the others that six million Jews will be killed, but they think she is mentally disturbed and that there is nothing anyone can do, anyway.

The novel describes in detail the horrible treatment by the Nazis of their Jewish captives. They are starved, beaten, and rarely allowed to wash. They work long hours, sleep on boards without bedding, and are made to wear the filthy and ragged clothing of other people who have been sent to the ovens before them. The strongest-willed among them, including Rivka and Hannah's aunt, Gitl, regularly remind the others that good humor can produce hope, which can sustain life. Even so, the Commandant comes regularly to the barracks to do what the prisoners call the Choosing, which consists of selecting who will go that day to the ovens. Each day that someone is not chosen is one more day of survival, which is what Gitl calls the Devil's arithmetic. One day, Rivka is chosen, but at the last moment, Hannah changes places with her and is sent to the ovens. As she steps through the door, she returns home to New Rochelle, where she realizes that her Aunt Eva is actually Rivka, who has grown up and changed her name. Eva's brother, who is Hannah's Grandpa Will, also has changed his name from Wolfe. Eva tells Hannah that Gitl and her friend Yitzchak also survived the camps. Yitzchak became a politician in Israel and Gitl started an organization in Israel for camp victims that later became an adoption agency, which she named after her niece who died in the camps, Chaya, which means "life."



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

The Devil's Arithmetic, by Jane Yolen, is a novel about a contemporary American Jewish girl named Hannah who is magically transported to the time of World War II, where she is part of a family sent to a German concentration camp. The family calls the girl by her Hebrew name, Chaya. She has no idea how she got there, and as the horrible, fear-filled days in the concentration camp go by, the girl increasingly cannot remember her original home or family.

In Chapter 1, Hannah is at her home in New Rochelle, New York, on the Jewish holiday of Passover, which happens to fall this year on Easter Sunday. Hannah does not want to go that evening to the first Seder, a ritual feast of Passover, which will be held at the home of her Grandpa Will and Grandma Belle. She complains to her mother that it will be boring, and all the punchlines of the jokes will be in Yiddish, but her mother reminds her that Seder is about remembering. To this, Hannah responds that all Jewish holidays are about remembering, and she is tired of remembering. Her mother says Hannah must go, anyway. Grandma Belle lost both parents to the Nazis before she and her brother managed to escape, and Grandpa Will lost everyone except Hannah's Aunt Eva. During the drive to the dinner, Hannah's little brother, Aaron, complains he does not feel well. Aaron is worried about reciting a religious text called the Haggadah, and Hannah promises she will help him if he forgets anything. Aaron then begs for a story, and Hannah obliges with a horror story. When they arrive, her Aunt Rose kisses Hannah, remarks that she has grown, and asks how old she is now. Hannah says she is thirteen, which is almost true and runs to the bathroom to wash off Aunt Rose's lipstick.

In Chapter 2, nobody notices when Hannah enters the living room. Everyone is sitting around Grandpa Will, who is screaming at the television, on which images of Nazi concentration camp victims and survivors are being shown. Grandpa Will shouts, "Give them this!" and displays the tattooed concentration camp number on his arm. When Aaron was a baby, Hannah had drawn numbers on her own arm with a pen, but when Grandpa Will saw this, he became wildly upset, screaming something over and over in Yiddish at her. She never dared to ask what the words meant. Hannah goes to the kitchen to help her Aunt Eva, who never married, and lives with her brother, Will, and his wife, Belle. Aunt Eva helped to raise Hannah's father, who is the only child of Will and Belle. Hannah thinks about a conversation she had with her friend, Rosemary, in which they tried to guess why Eva never married. Hannah likes Eva, although she no longer thinks her aunt is as wise and magical and she once thought. At dinner, when the family says a prayer in Yiddish, Aaron falters, which annoys Hannah. She pinches Aaron hard on the upper arm, drawing a rebuke from her father.



Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

At the start of Chapter 1, Hannah complains that all Jewish holidays are about remembering and she is tired of remembering. This announces a theme that the author will continue throughout the book, which is the vital importance to those who suffered through the Holocaust that they never forget what happened. To forget would dishonor those who died in the camps, as Hannah's mother suggests when she reminds Hannah of the atrocities suffered by her elder relatives. This scene also indicates the central role played by religious holidays in the lives of Jewish people, and of Yiddish, which Hannah apparently does not speak. Hannah's reluctance to participate in these traditions indicates the challenge of keeping the Jewish heritage alive and relevant to young people in a rapidly changing world. When Aaron begs Hannah for a story and she obliges, another motif of the book is foreshadowed, which is the importance of storytelling. Hannah is good at it, and storytelling is the vehicle by which traditions survive.

In Chapter 2, Grandpa Will's extreme agitation at old images of Nazi brutality shows how intensely many Jewish people were affected all their lives by their experiences in World War II. Hannah's recollection of how upset Grandpa Will became when she once drew numbers on her arm again foreshadows an important role that the prisoners' tattoos will play in the story. As the author describes the relationships of the people at the Seder dinner, Hannah thinks about how her Aunt Eva does not seem as magical and wise as she once did. This is another hint of things to come in the story, as is Hannah's pinching of her brother's arm at the end of the chapter. The author is setting up a number of touch points in these first chapters that she will revisit later, after Hannah finds herself in completely different circumstances.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

During the long and boring dinner, Hannah often glances out the window while her father gives explanations from the Haggadah of stories concerning ancient Jewish history. Hannah reflects that the next Seder, on the following evening, will be at her Uncle Dan's house, which will be more fun, because her three cousins, boys her own age, will be there. Hannah likes her gentle Uncle Dan, who was not in a concentration camp, and does not get upset about the past. Aaron recites in Hebrew perfectly from the Haggadah, but when he reads the English translation, he mispronounces the word "herb" and their Uncle Sam snorts, which embarrasses Aaron. Hannah corrects him, and Aaron reads about eating "bitter herbs" on this night, which annoys Hannah, because her friend Rosemary, who is not Jewish, gets to eat jelly beans. Hannah does get to try wine, though, for toasts. Aaron goes in search of a hidden matzoh, or flat bread, which he finds wrapped in a cloth under Grandpa Will's chair, where he hides it every year. Aaron then gets to hide it, and Aunt Eva and Aunt Rose conduct a noisy search for Aaron and the bread, all as part of a Seder game to uncover the order of the universe. Hannah begins to feel woozy from the wine, and she empties her glass into a goblet meant for Elijah, the prophet. Grandpa Will praises Hannah for her sacrifice, which makes her feel secretly guilty. The next step of the ceremony is for Hannah to open the front door, to let Elijah enter. When she does so, instead of seeing a row of doors to other apartments in the building, Hannah sees a green field, over which a man marches toward her, singing a song about being buried alive.

At the start of Chapter 4, Hannah turns to ask her grandfather how he did this trick, but her family and the dinner table are gone. They have been replaced by a simple table and stove, and the smell of fresh-baked bread. Hannah thinks the wine is giving her daydreams. A woman asks if he is coming, and Hannah thinks the woman means Elijah. The woman, who is pounding bread dough, says something in Yiddish that Hannah is startled to realize she can understand. The woman calls her Chaya, and asks if Shmuel is coming. Hannah sees that the man in the field is coming closer. He is whistling a song Hannah recognizes. Still thinking she is some kind of crazy dream, Hannah says Shmuel is arriving. The woman urges her to get the cloth, just as the man arrives and greets Hannah as her "almost-married" Uncle Shmuel. He also greets the woman, his sister, whose name is Gitl, and they discuss Shmuel's fiancé, Fayge, whom they both admire. Hannah watches silently, not understanding what is happening. Shmuel chides Gitl about a man she likes, but Gitl denies it. Hannah makes a whimpering noise, and Shmuel puts his arm around her. He and Gitl say they understand that the recent death of her parents is difficult for her. At dinner, Hannah keeps expecting the food to fade away, but it does not. She eats little, and later sleeps in a room with Gitl, who smooths her hair and comforts Hannah about missing her parents, saying that she and Shmuel are her family now.



Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

In Chapter 3, more references are set up for Jane Yolen to revisit later in the book. The reader learns that she has three cousins, all boys, and an easygoing uncle named Dan. The bitter herbs of the dinner annoy her, because her non-Jewish friend, Rosemary, gets to eat candy. The search for the bread and for Aaron foreshadow other quests to come, just as the empty chair for the ancient prophet, Elijah, and Hannah's opening of the door for Elijah will reappear. At the end of the chapter, Hannah's world suddenly transforms.

As Chapter 4 begins, Hannah thinks her grandfather has performed an amazing trick, and then she thinks the wine she drank is giving her dreams. Suddenly, amid these new people, Hannah can understand Yiddish, and the people are calling her by her Hebrew name, Chaya. The familiarity to Hannah of the tune that Yitzchak is whistling is one way the author begins to create ties between Hannah's life in New Rochelle and this new one. Yolen's task is to make the appearance of this completely different world seem believable to the reader, which is why it helps to establish connections between Hannah's two lives. Hannah's whimpering is a sign of her confusion, and Yolen makes this confusion understandable to Gitl and Shmuel, because the parents of their niece, Chaya, have just died. This transitional chapter is one of the author's biggest challenges in the book and the reader gets the impression that Hannah is stunned almost speechless by what is happening to her.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

When Hannah awakens, the house is still dark. She creeps out of bed and opens the front door, hoping to be back home, but the field is still there. She remembers a dream about being at Seder, and her aunt singing the same song that Shmuel was whistling, and she feels a terrible longing for the people in the dream. Behind her, Shmuel says he cannot sleep because of worrying about getting married, and he asks if Hannah had another bad dream. She nods. Shmuel says he is not frightened by being married, but by getting married. They talk about Lublin, the town in which Shmuel says Hannah lived. She replies that she lives in New Rochelle, New York, and her name is Hannah, not Chaya. Not taking her seriously, Shmuel laughs at the idea of Lublin being in America. At breakfast, Hannah is startled by having nothing but black bread, coffee, and milk with clots of cream in it. When someone knocks on the door, Hannah hopes it is one of her parents or her Aunt Eva, but it is a big man named Yitzchak. He greets Hannah, shyly says hello to Gitl, and tells Shmuel he has chickens outside as a wedding gift. Yitzchak then summons his children, a boy named Reuven and a girl named Tzipporah, each about three or four years old, who come in from outside. When Yitzchak leaves with the children, Shmuel teases Gitl about Yitzchak's interest in her, but Gitl sniffs that Yitzchak knows nothing about how to raise his motherless children.

In Chapter 6, Gitl gives Hannah a dress to wear for the wedding of Shmuel and Fayge. It is one of Gitl's childhood outfits, a sailor-suit dress that Hannah thinks is ridiculous, but she has no choice. She puts it on, and Gitl gives her two blue ribbons for her hair. When Hannah looks in the mirror, she sees that her braces are gone and that, as Chaya Abramowicz, she looks much more old-fashioned than Hannah Stern, as if she had come from one of the old photographs on her Aunt Belle's piano. Guests begin to arrive, and Hannah meets a girl with a breathless voice named Rachel, who introduces three other girls, Shifre, Esther, and Yente. Rachel says she will be Hannah's best friend. Hannah says that Rosemary, at home, is her best friend, but Rachel can be her second-best friend, and Rachel can be her best friend here. Hannah realizes she is beginning to have trouble telling which one of her personalities is the dream person, Chaya or Hannah. The other girls ask about her hometown of Lublin, which Hannah describes as she thinks about New Rochelle. The girls are amazed at the customs Hannah describes. Esther says she heard a story once about a girl who disguised herself as a boy to study the sacred Jewish text, the Torah. Hannah recognizes the plot of the movie *Yentl*, starring Barbara Streisand. Rachel asks Hannah to tell the story of *Yentl*.

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

When Hannah hopes that as she looks out the door the next morning she will be home, she remembers what the author describes as a dream about Seder. In this way, Yolen shows that Hannah is having trouble determining what her real life is, and what the



dream is. When Shmuel asks if Hannah had a bad dream, she assents. Hannah tries to tell Shmuel that she is from New York, and when Yitzchak knocks at the door, she hopes it will be someone from her family in New Rochelle. When Shmuel teases Gitl about Yitzchak's romantic interest in her, it foreshadows a special relationship between Gitl and Yitzchak.

In Chapter 6, it is no accident that the dress Gitl gives Hannah for the upcoming wedding seems ugly to Hannah. The outfit she will soon wear will be far worse. The blue ribbons Gitl gives Hannah also will have significance soon in the story. The author puts Hannah in front of a mirror, which allows her to see that her braces are gone, and that she looks old-fashioned, which helps to establish the major shift in time that soon will be revealed. The three girls Hannah meets are reminiscent of the three cousins she has in New York, although those three are boys. The fourth girl, Rachel, is matched by the author to Hannah's best friend in New Rochelle called Rosemary. Even the story of Yentl is a bridge between the two worlds, because Esther knows it, and it was made into a movie that Hannah saw. In stitching together the past and present through these associations, the author demonstrates that no moment in time exists purely of itself in a vacuum. The present is always influenced and shaped by the past.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

In Chapter 7, as the wedding party walks and goes by wagon through the woods toward the village of Viosk, Hannah tells the other girls many stories, one after the other, most of which are compressed versions of movies she has seen. Aaron and Rosemary always had liked Hannah's stories, but these new friends are thrilled by them. Hannah had never been very popular, but these girls jostle one another to get close to her. As they are approaching Viosk, they hear a band, and see Shmuel dancing. Other men from the village join him, while the women watch and sing. Hannah's new friends talk about why Fayge's father, Rabbi Boruch, would let her marry Shmuel, who is not rich. They say it is because Fayge is the rabbi's favorite child, so he let her marry for love instead of through a traditional, arranged marriage. A man described as a badchan, which is a Yiddish word Hannah does not know, approaches her and says that her name, Chaya, means "life." Rachel explains that the badchan is hired to make up rhymes, sing songs, and tell fortunes. The badchan reminds Hannah of someone, and then she realizes he is like a court jester, without the cap and bells. The thought of a Jewish jester makes her laugh, and the other girls join in, without even knowing the joke.

In Chapter 8, more people arrive through the forest outside Viosk, which seems to Hannah like a family party at home. This makes her suddenly wonder where home is, and she has to force herself to recall New Rochelle. Gitl takes Hannah to meet the bride, Fayge, who soon will be Hannah's aunt by marriage. Fayge is sitting in a wagon with an older man dressed in black. Fayge is dressed in white, has jet-black hair, and is one of the most beautiful women Hannah has ever seen. She invites Hannah to ride with her in the wagon, which begins traveling down the road into Viosk with the other wagons. Fayge admits that part of her is a little afraid to be married, and Hannah confides to her that Shmuel said he was afraid to get married but not be married. Fayge loves this, although her father sitting next to them harrumphs. When they reach Viosk, they see a number of cars and army trucks. A man wearing medals emerges from one of the black cars and the badchan points at him, calling the man the Angel of Death. Hannah asks what year it is, and the surprised Rabbi Boruch says it is 1942. Suddenly, Hannah realizes she is not Hannah Stern of New Rochelle anymore. She says the men are Nazis, who will kill millions of Jews. The rabbi advises her not to fear men, because only God should be feared. He signals and the wagons move closer to the Nazis.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

The significance of Hannah continuing to tell the other girls stories is that they are establishing common ground by sharing the same stories, just as the Jewish people do in preserving stories of the tragedies and triumphs of their lives. It is also significant that Hannah is popular among these girls, all of whom are Jewish, like her. She is with her



own people, and is feeling the power and joy of their solidarity. Through the characters' discussion of arranged marriages, Jane Yolen makes the point that this heritage is still quite conservative in mid-20th century Europe. The badchan, in telling Hannah that Chaya means life, strengthens another motif in the novel, which is what Hannah will learn and experience about how to savor and preserve life in the most difficult of circumstances. When the other girls laugh with her without knowing why, it is a hint to how they might withstand their upcoming trials through good humor.

Hannah slips in and out of her current reality again when she sees the people arriving for the wedding, reminding her of relatives in New Rochelle, a place she can now barely remember. Her past and even her self-image are being overwhelmed by the power of her current experiences. Her talk with Fayge about fear of marriage is a symbolic comparison to the much worse fears they must soon face. When the badchan identifies the man with the medals as the Angel of Death, Hannah suddenly realizes where she is, and asks what year it is, to prove her suspicion. The first signs of her inability to change the fate of the Jewish people are given here, when the party approaches the Nazis despite Hannah's warnings.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

The villagers gather before the soldiers while Rabbi Boruch, Shmuel, and another man have an intense conversation with the Nazi leader. Shmuel says the people must go with the Nazis in their trucks. Hannah protests, but the Nazis have guns, and they say it is government policy for Jews to be resettled. Shmuel assures Fayge that they still will get married, but Hannah says the Nazis will prevent it. She says they will gas everyone in ovens, a statement that incurs the anger of Gitl. Rachel believes that Hannah is talking about the story of Hansel and Gretel, which Hannah had told them earlier. Gitl and Fayge suddenly realize that some of their relatives are missing, and Shmuel says the Nazis have already taken them away. The rabbi tells the villagers that they must go with the Nazis, who say they will look after the village for them. The badchan does not like this and makes predictions of doom. As the villagers climb into the trucks, they begin to sing. Hannah cannot believe it. Her own classroom memories of the Holocaust are coming back to her now. Even as the others sing, a taste like bitter herbs comes to her mouth. She tells herself not to be sick, and suddenly finds that she, too, is singing.

In Chapter 10, the people in the trucks see a train station guarded by armed soldiers, who usher the villagers out of the trucks. Hannah hurts her knee. The villagers see baggage on the ground, some of which they recognize as belonging to relatives. The soldiers make the villagers lie on the ground, kicking and hitting some of them. They take away all of their possessions, as children cry and adults pray and moan. The soldiers tell them to get up, herd them into two wooden boxcars, and lock the doors. The people are crammed in so tightly that they cannot move. Hannah tells the rabbi she is from the future, and she knows what will happen. She begs him to do something, but he only tells her to pray. A man says he heard that Jews were being resettled in Russia. Another man says he heard that on the Polish border, an entire synagogue full of people on was burned by the Nazis. Hannah tries to get the people to do something, but there is nothing they can do. A woman says her child is senseless from all this frightening talk. Another woman takes the child in her arms for a moment, and realizes that the child is dead. Hannah begins to cry.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

The discussions between the villagers and the Nazis are made even more dire by predictions of doom from Hannah and the badchan, but the point is that nothing can be done to change the situation. The villagers have no power and no weapons. They must do what they are told, and the only response they can summon to the injustice is to sing. This reaction is life-affirming, and it gives them hope and strength to endure. Hannah can literally taste the bitter herbs about which her family in New Rochelle was reading, but rather than becoming sick, she makes the healthier choice of joining in song.



The story turns increasingly bleak in Chapter 10, when the villagers endure injury, insult, dispossession, and even death at the hands of the Nazis. Hannah again tries to tell everyone what will happen. Understandably, her protestations that she is from the future are dismissed, but people begin telling stories they have heard about terrible things that have happened to Jews at the hands of the Nazis. Here, the author is setting up dramatic tension between the best instincts of the captives, which are to retain hope and as much optimism as possible under the circumstances, and a desire to succumb to fear and a sense of hopelessness. The death of the child makes the starkness of this choice all the more evident. This is not a theoretical situation, it is actually happening. As powerless as the people are, they still must find a way to survive. When the full horror of their plight hits home, at first all Hannah can do is cry.



Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

The train travels for four days and nights, stopping only twice. One boxcar full of passengers is let out at each of the two stops, and the dead are thrown by soldiers onto a siding. Finally, they arrive at the camp, a line of barracks surrounded by barbed wire fence. Over the gate stands a sign that reads in German, "Work makes you free." The soldiers separate the women and children from the men. Hannah says she was right, the villagers should have run, but Gitl points out that there is nowhere to go. A tall woman in a blue dress, who is a prisoner but not Jewish, takes control of the women. The first thing she does is demand that Hannah give her the blue ribbons from her hair. The women are hurried to an amphitheater and told to undress for a shower, which frightens Hannah, who fears being gassed and burned. Shyly, the women and girls undress and wait for twenty minutes. Some of the women sing and Hannah decides to be brave, but they do get ice-cold showers. Next, their hair is cut and their heads shaved. Without their hair, Hannah cannot recognize the other people. Hannah cries, but Gitl comforts her, and Hannah agrees to never cry again before these monsters.

In Chapter 12, everyone is still sitting naked and cold on benches while the rest of the people have their hair shaved off. The woman in the blue dress then signals them into the next room to get clothing, and when the woman makes a gesture with her right hand, Hannah notices that she has only three fingers. In a room that reminds Hannah of an attic somewhere she cannot place, the women and children paw through several tables holding dirty old clothing, and quickly put on whatever they find. Hannah dresses Yitzchak's little daughter, Tzipporah, who is too stunned to help. They all are herded into another room, put in single file, and wait their turns to have identification numbers tattooed on their arms. The prisoner doing the tattoos tells Hannah that she is wearing his daughter's dress, and that she also was named Chaya. He whispers that Chaya means "live" and asks Hannah to live, for all the Chayas. In the barracks, they lie down on shelves of wood stacked into the sides of the walls, with neither blankets nor pillows. Hannah puts Tzipporah on a shelf and goes to look for food. She sees Gitl, and when Hannah's stomach rumbles from hunger, Gitl laughs. Hannah is shocked, but Gitl explains that without laughter, there is no hope. They try to get food from the guard, but he merely points to a brick chimney from which smoke curls, and tells them it is Jew smoke. Gitl tells Hannah to go to bed, calling her Chaya, but Hannah says she is now Number J197241. Gitl says she will always be Chaya to her. Hannah goes to a shelf and sleeps, dreaming of meat, wine, and bitter herbs.

Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

By now, the extent of the villagers' peril is plain to them. More people who have died on the trip are simply cast aside by the soldiers. The sign at the camp that reads, "Work makes you free," was an infamous sign at Auschwitz, one of the real-life death camps of



World War II. Again, Hannah complains that the villagers should have tried to do something, obliging Gitl to point out that there was nothing they could do, and nowhere to go. Hannah's agreement with Gitl to never again cry before the monstrous Germans is indicative of a resolve that is taking root in her to resist, to not succumb. The tattooist echoes this sentiment when he tells her to live, for all the Chayas. Gitl reinforces it again when she laughs at Hannah's stomach rumbling, and explains that laughter gives hope. Nor will Gitl ever let Hannah forget her name, despite the tattoo that identifies her by a mere number. Already, Gitl and Hannah are preparing themselves mentally for a physical ordeal that can only be survived through strength of character. When Hannah sleeps, her former life comes to her in dreams of food, wine, and bitter herbs, which are a connecting symbol for her across the decades.



Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

Hannah awakens to a loud horn that at first she thinks is a clock radio. She sits up suddenly and hits her head on the shelf above her. She wonders what a clock radio is. Her leg hurts where she banged it during the journey, and now she remembers everything. A guard enters and tells them to hurry if they want food. Hannah sees Gitl, who is bending over Tzipporah. The girl has a fly on her cheek and when Hannah tries to remove it, Gitl tells her not to touch Tzipporah, and slaps her twice. Tzipporah is dead. In a room where they are fed thin potato soup, a friendly girl named Rivka gives them each a metal bowl for food, washing, and drinking, which she cautions that they must never lose. After the meal, the woman in the blue dress lines up the prisoners and tells them she expects hard work from them all. An officer looking at them reminds Hannah of someone named Mr. Unsward, but she cannot recall who that might be. The officer tells them they will work hard and never try to escape, or they will die. Again, Hannah feels there is something she is not remembering, and she resolves to ask Gitl. From the corner of her eye, Hannah sees Gitl nearby, as well as Fayge, Shifre, and Esther. Hannah remembers telling the girls stories in the forest, but she cannot recall the stories themselves. She whispers Gitl's name, and Gitl responds by whispering, "Chaya."

In Chapter 14, the women and children are let into an open area for one hour at night, surrounded by watchtowers and barbed wire. Rivka tells the others not to be afraid, because something she calls the Choosing is not done at night. Rivka says she has been in the camp for a year, and her whole family has been killed in that time, except her brother Wolfe, who is being forced by the Nazis to do something bad. She tells the others that if they follow the rules, they can avoid the Angel of Death. Esther walks away, disinterested, and Rivka says to let her go, because some people will not listen. She tells the others to remember their numbers, and Rivka explains how she has matched each digit in her number to something important in her life. She says never to stand next to people with a G in their number, because they are Greek Jews, who do not speak Yiddish and cannot understand German, which means they react slowly, and are quickly chosen for death. People with low numbers, like Rivka's number, have been in the camp a long time, and are survivors who can organize things, such as getting shoes and sweaters. The girls also must never go near a wooden fence that the prisoners call the door to Lilith's Cave, the cave of the bride of death. Rivka adds that when the Commandant comes for a Choosing, the children must be ushered quickly into the garbage dump, called the midden, where they hide until the Commandant leaves. Hannah thinks of a child hiding, but cannot remember who the child is. Rivka gives the girls the shoes she has organized for them. Hannah memorizes the number on her arm by matching each digit to something related to her family. That night, Hannah's dreams are filled with sobs and she awakens crying, but cannot remember the dream.



Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

Another example of how Hannah's past is being overwhelmed by the present is given in her failure to remember what a clock radio is. The author's symbolic point is that in a similar way, people victimized in concentration camps can become so numb that their thoughts become disordered. Gitl's anger at Hannah for touching Tzipporah, who has died, is simply anger that Gitl cannot afford to direct at the Nazis. Just when Hannah realizes she cannot remember the stories she has told the other girls, Gitl whispers her name, "Chaya," whose very meaning is a call to live.

Rivka's invaluable advice to the others in Chapter 14 is ignored by Esther, which is a bad omen for her. Everything Rivka is telling them is about how to survive, and anyone who does not care about such hints is showing signs of giving up. When Rivka mentions children hiding in the midden, and Hannah thinks vaguely of another child, she is trying to remember her brother, Aaron, but is so traumatized that she cannot recall the name. She memorizes her number using references to her family, but her thoughts are so disordered that she cannot even remember a dream that makes her cry.



Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

The next morning, the Commandant comes. The women and girls make penetrating clucking noises as signals to the children to run to the midden, where they quickly take off their clothing and jump into the garbage. Hannah sees a baby, quickly grabs the child and dives into the foul garbage with her. Hannah has forgotten to take off her dress, which now reeks, but Rivka organizes a small bowl of water for her to wash. Hannah begins to save bits of her bread at meals for Yitchak's little boy, Reuven. Gitl scolds Hannah, but Gitl also gives her bread to the boy. On the third day in camp, the Commandant returns, this time for a Choosing. Hannah asks Rivka what a Choosing is, but Rivka hisses for her to be quiet, and only makes the sign of drawing her finger across her throat. The Commandant is a small, handsome man who speaks quietly. He reminds Hannah of a photo she had seen of the real-life Nazi butcher, Dr. Mengele, the so-called Angel of Auschwitz, but as soon as she recalls this, she forgets it again. Rivka, puzzled, says the Commandant's name is Breuer. The scene switches to Gitl, who works sorting clothes. She "organizes" a blue scarf that she gives to Hannah as a birthday present. Confused, Hannah thinks her birthday is not until February, but Gitl corrects her. Gitl has heard that Yitzchak and Shmuel are alive, but when Fayge insists on knowing about her father, Rabbi Boruch, Gitl sadly says he was Chosen. Gitl begins reciting a holy scripture, the Kaddish, and the others join in.

In Chapter 16, Hannah reflects that the first Choosing was the hardest, and that survival of each Choosing is one more day a person stays alive. Gitl calls this day-by-day counting the Devil's arithmetic. Shifre and Hannah, who work together cleaning the cooking cauldrons, often daydream about their favorite foods. One day, Hannah cries because she cannot remember any food except potato soup and brown bread. She cannot remember anything. Rivka enters and tells her to stop crying. Rivka confides that the grown-ups have a plan, but then a shout announces the Commandant Breuer is arriving. Little Reuven does not get to the midden in time, and Breuer puts him in the car. Later, Hannah is distressed that she could not help Reuven, and wants to fight, but Rivka reminds her they are powerless. Even so, Rivka adds, they are all heroes. That night, Fayge tells an old story about a fight against a werewolf whose heart belonged to Satan, and Hannah thinks that is where they are now, in the belly of the werewolf.

Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

Hannah's plunge into the garbage dump is symbolic of how degraded everyone's lives have become in the camp. Even so, Hannah and Gitl give what little they have to Reuven. The meaning of the Choosing is explained, and the term is ironic, because it sounds as if people are being selected for a special consideration or favor, rather than to go to their deaths. Hannah's confusion about who she is continues when Gitl gives her a birthday present, although Hannah does not think it is her birthday. Indeed, the



camps must have been so terrifying and horrible that people often were in danger of losing even their own identities. On a symbolic level, that is the meaning of Hannah's struggle to remember who she is. When she cannot even remember food except for the potato soup and brown bread they eat in camp, Hannah has finally gotten her wish at the start of the book, when she said she was tired of remembering, and did not want to remember. Reuven is taken; another person close to Hannah is gone. Fayge tells a story, demonstrating that some sense still can be made of this senseless tragedy through storytelling. Hannah feels herself to be in the belly of the werewolf, as in Fayge's story. It is important that Fayge has remembered this story, so she can tell it. The author is suggesting that sometimes, the only solace comes from remembering.



Chapters 17 and 18

Chapters 17 and 18 Summary

That night, Gitl whispers to Hannah that the adults have a plan to escape, but she gives Hannah no details, except that the men are involved, too. For a number of days, nothing happens, but then Gitl awakens Hannah in the night. She gives Hannah a pair of shoes and takes her to the door. A guard has been bribed to leave it unlocked. Hannah asks about Fayge, but Gitl says she has decided not to risk going with them. Terrified, they head for the midden, but shots ring out, and they must retreat to the barracks. Hannah realizes that she left the shoes outside, but Gitl tells her not to worry about it, because the shoes belong to the three-fingered woman.

In Chapter 18, roll call is held outside. Six men stand in chains, including Shmuel. Breuer says the men tried to escape, and he has been too easy on everyone. The men are lined up against a wall. Shmeul is the only one smiling. Fayge runs to him, he kisses the top of her head, and they all are shot dead. Soldiers drag away the corpses, helped by a sorrowful boy, who Rivka whispers is her brother, Wolfe. Hannah sees that the three-fingered woman's hand is bandaged and bloody. Hannah whispers to Gitl that Yitzchak was not among the men who were executed. Later that afternoon, at the water pump with Rivka, Shifre, and Esther, Hannah has a vision of laughing girls at a water fountain. She suddenly remembers something, and tells the others that six million Jews will die, but the Jewish people will survive and the Jewish state of Israel will arise. Esther does not believe this, but Hannah says she remembers. She tries to explain her memories to the others, but they are caught talking by a guard. He says Breuer's new rules are that prisoners who do not work must go to the gate. He selects Shifre, Esther, and Rivka. Without thinking, Hannah snatches Rivka's kerchief and puts it on her own head when the guard isn't looking. She tells Rivka to run, and takes Rivka's place. As they walk, Hannah tells the other girls about Hannah Stern of New Rochelle. Together, they step through door of Lilith's Cave.

Chapters 17 and 18 Analysis

The attempt of the adults to arrange an escape shows that they have never given up, despite overwhelming odds against them. Their escape plan was probably doomed from the start, and it certainly does not get very far, but it proves, in another way, the bravery and heroism they already have displayed by withstanding all the terrors that have befallen them. Shmuel's smile even as he faces the firing squad shows that he will not be cowed or beaten by his captors. He goes to his death without showing fear. At the water pump, when Hannah has a vision of girls playing in a different life at a water fountain, she again tells her friends of the six million Jews who will die, but this time, she adds the optimistic note that a Jewish state will be formed, and Jews as a people will rise again. In an act of spontaneous and tremendous courage, Hannah sacrifices herself to save Rivka. As Hannah goes to her death, she remembers who she is, which

is symbolic of the clarity of mind and a kind of grace, born of dignity and strength in the face of the worst troubles.



Chapter 19, Epilogue, and What Is True about This Book

Chapter 19, Epilogue, and What Is True about This Book Summary

When Chapter 19 opens, Hannah is alone, standing before a door marked 4N. She interprets this as four for the four members of her family, and N for New Rochelle. She looks behind herself, and sees a large table piled with food, around which sit seven adults and a small boy. An old man asks Hannah if she sees him coming, and Hannah whispers that nobody is coming. Her Aunt Eva tells her to sit down, in a chair Hannah knows was reserved for the prophet Elijah. She sits, and Eva notices her staring at the tattoo on Eva's arm. Eva asks if Hannah wants her to talk about it, but instead, Hannah describes each number the same way Rivka described her own number. One of the numbers referred to Wolfe, who Eva says changed his name when they came to America. Eva says her name was different, too. She used to be called Rivka. Hannah replies that she remembers.

The Epilogue states that Aunt Eva told Hannah the rest of the story later, when they were alone, because nobody else would believe it. Yitzchak had escaped, and finished out the war fighting with the partisans in the forest against the Germans. Gitl weighed only 73 pounds when the camp was liberated in 1945, but she also survived. Gitl and Yitchak emigrated to Israel. Neither of them ever married, but the two remained close friends for the rest of their lives. Yitchak became a member of the Israeli senate, and Gitl started an organization that helped camp survivors to cope and to locate whoever remained alive in their families. It later became an adoption agency, which Gitl named after her niece, a hero who had died in the camps: Chaya, which means life. In a short section called "What is True about This Book," the author states that she was raised Jewish and some of the character's traits were drawn from her own family. She writes that the facts of the concentration camps are all true, although the characters in the story are fictional. The unnamed camp was a composite of real camps. The author states that fiction cannot come close to capturing the real horror of this atrocity, but it can be a witness, a memory, and an affirmation of those who managed to survive.

Chapter 19, Epilogue, and What Is True about This Book Analysis

Hannah's reappearance in the bosom of her family as she faces the death camp's oven door is a deliverance. She has sacrificed herself for a friend, and it is as if her reward is a return to life. It takes a while for Hannah to reorient herself, but she soon realizes where she is, and learns that her Aunt Eva changed her name from Rivka. Hannah has saved her own aunt from death and, most important, Hannah remembers. The survival



of Yitzchak and Gitl, and the good deeds they do later in life, are a kind of reward for the horrors through which they lived. Even so, they do not marry one another, or anyone else, which indicates how marred their lives were by the traumas of the camp. Gitl names her agency after Chaya, who died in the camps. It would appear that Hannah has lived through the experience of Chaya in the camp, almost as if Hannah were a reincarnation of Chaya. No matter how this magic is interpreted, the author's point is that survival of a people depends on passing stories down through the generations, so that nothing is forgotten. Jane Yolen makes that clear in her final note to the reader, "What Is True about This Book," when she indicates that her novel is one of the stories that continue to bear witness to the unspeakable miseries and the great heroism of the Jewish people during World War II.



Characters

Hannah Stern

Hannah Stern, also known in the novel as Chaya Abramowicz, is its central character. Hannah is almost thirteen when the story begins and lives with her family in New Rochelle, New York. Several members of her family suffered at the hands of the Nazis during World War II, and this still has a big impact on their lives, and on those of others in the family, including Hannah. For her, being raised as a Jew appears to be at least as much about recalling the traumas of the past as it is about the religion's other teachings and traditions. Remembering what happened is essential to her grandparents, but is uninteresting to young Hannah at the start of the story. Only after she travels in time back to a concentration camp in 1942 does she learn the importance of remembering. For the most part, Hannah is a typical preteen, focused on her friends and her own life, with little concern for events of the distant past. She feels close to the elders in her family but also finds them tiresome or annoying at times. Similarly, she loves her little brother, although he can get on her nerves. Hannah would be an unremarkable character if she never went to a concentration camp, assumed the identity of Chaya, and had to endure the privations and humiliations of that experience. Through it, reserves of personal strength, dignity, and qualities of leadership emerge in her that she probably never knew she had. Over the course of the novel, Hannah is transformed from an everyday girl into a mature and wise young heroine.

Gitl

Gitl is the aunt with whom Chaya goes to live after her parents die. She is strong, both physically and emotionally. Gitl goes to the concentration camp with Hannah, and is the most important influence on the girl during that ordeal. Gitl puts much emphasis on good humor, pride, and dignity as ways to continue to assert one's value in the face of the Nazi attempts to devalue their captives. At times, Gitl has to restrain herself from open displays of rage that most likely would end in her extermination by the Germans. She does control herself, however, and seems to be afire with determination to survive the camp. She has a special relationship with the butcher in her village, Yitzchak, who also goes to the concentration camp, but Gitl scoffs at suggestions that the two might marry. She seems to be unusually independent, even though she is capable of great emotion, which she displays toward the children of the widowed Yitzchak and toward Chaya. Gitl also is resourceful, as shown by her ability to "organize" a scarf at the camp for Chaya's birthday, and her involvement in a plan to escape the camp. It is Gitl who invents the term, "the Devil's arithmetic" to describe the day-by-day count of survival that each person in the camp must make. Gitl is among those who are liberated from the camp, after which she lives in the newly established Jewish state of Israel, where she starts and runs an agency that helps to reunite survivors of the Nazi atrocities with their loved ones. Gitl is one of the most admirable and powerful figures in this novel.



Rivka

Rivka is a young girl about Hannah's age. The two meet in the concentration camp and become good friends. Rivka has been there for about a year when Hannah arrives, and all but one of Rivka's family members have been killed by the Nazis. Rivka is a rather plain-looking girl who nevertheless has a friendliness and openness that at times make her seem lovely to Hannah. More important than that, however, is Rivka's knowledge about how to survive in the camp. She has learned the best ways to minimize the chances that she will be selected by the Commandant for extermination, and she passes on this information to Hannah and her friends. Rivka also knows how to make camp life a little more tolerable by getting articles of clothing and extra bits of food and water. Like Gitl, Rivka understands that one's frame of mind is a key to getting through the devastating experiences of camp life without simply giving up and ultimately dying. She tries to remain hopeful despite the apparent hopelessness of their situation, and she advises Hannah to never give the Nazis the pleasure of seeing her cry. Rivka understands that resistance is victory, and that in this case, just to survive is to successfully resist. Late in the novel, Hannah sacrifices herself to save Rivka's life. After Hannah is transported in time back to her life in New Rochelle, she discovers that her Aunt Eva's name used to be Rivka. The author implies that Rivka understands and shares the amazing secret of Hannah's time travel.

Aunt Eva

Aunt Eva is the unmarried sister of Hannah's grandfather. She helped to raise Hannah's father, along with his own parents. As a little girl, Hannah always thought of her Aunt Eva as magical and wise, but by the time Hannah is approaching her teen years, she has begun to lose that sense of her aunt's specialness. Aunt Eva now seems to her to be a rather plain and simple person, and this makes Hannah a little sad. Hannah and her friend, Rosemary, speculate about why Eva never married, even though she had several offers, but they do not come to any firm conclusions. After Hannah goes back in time to 1942, she meets a girl named Rivka at the camp, but Hannah is unaware that Rivka is Eva when she was young. Rivka is the most resourceful and strong-willed girl that Hannah knows in the camp. She gives Hannah more valuable information about survival than anyone else. When Hannah sacrifices her own life to save Rivka and then time-travels back to contemporary New York, she learns that Rivka was Aunt Eva in an earlier time. Now, Hannah's earlier feeling that Aunt Eva possessed magic and wisdom returns to her. The two share an understanding that, somehow, they knew each other in another time. In this way, Aunt Eva becomes the most magical character in the novel, because she is the only one who seems to understand, or at least appreciate, what happened to Hannah.

Shmuel

Shmuel is Gitl's brother and the uncle of Chaya or Hannah. At first, he seems a happy-go-lucky man, who likes to sing and tease his sister and who is kind to Hannah. He is



about to wed, and confides to Hannah that he is not afraid of marriage itself, but he is a bit afraid to get married. Even so, he seems to love his bride-to-be very much, and all indications are that he will be a good husband. He is not rich, but works hard, is honest and open, and has the love of his fiancée. Shmuel is sent to the camp, where he and the other men are separated from the women and children. After that, Gitl and the other females only see the males from a distance, and rarely have a chance to exchange a word. Shmuel re-enters the story as one of the main organizers of an escape attempt. He is caught, and lined up against a wall with five other men. Shmuel is the only one among them who continues to smile, which is a sign of his defiance, and his insistence on not being beaten by the enemy. His fiancée runs to him at the last second and he kisses her head before the firing squad kills them all.

Yitzchak

Yitzchak is the butcher in the village of Viosk. He has two young children but no wife, who apparently has died. Yitzchak is a big, powerful man, but he acts shy around Gitl, whom he obviously likes. When the villagers are transported to the camp, Yitzchak's children fall under the care of Gitl, with Hannah helping out. Yitzchak is seldom seen after that, and when an escape attempt is made, he is not among the men captured by the Nazis. At the end of the novel, the author explains that Yitzchak made good his escape, and finished out the war with partisans, fighting in the woods around the camp against the Nazis. Yitzchak lost both of his children in the camp, but he and Gitl remained friends for life, both of them living in Israel after the war, where Yitzchak became a political leader.

Fayge

Fayge is the fiancée of Shmuel. She is a beautiful, black-haired woman who befriends Hannah and is delighted to be marrying Shmuel. After the villagers go to the concentration camp, Fayge finds it very difficult to cope. She loses heart, and finally will not even participate in the escape attempt, telling Gitl that she would rather try to endure the hell in which she finds herself rather than face the terrors of the unknown. This is particularly sad, because Fayge is aware that Shmuel is involved in the escape attempt. After Shmuel is caught, Fayge has a last-second change of heart, and races to him as he faces the firing squad. She throws herself to the ground, embracing his legs, and dies with him.

Grandpa Will

Grandpa Will is the brother of Eva and the grandfather of Hannah. A concentration camp survivor, he has a habit of shouting at the television whenever it shows old images of Nazi atrocities, rolling back his sleeve and shaking his tattooed arm at the set. When Hannah writes numbers on her arm as a little girl, Grandpa Will becomes wildly upset, frightening her. After Hannah goes back in time, she sees a boy named



Wolfe, who helps the Nazi soldiers to transport corpses into the ovens. Later, Hannah realizes that Wolfe is her Grandpa Will, who changed his name after the war. In this story, Grandpa Will symbolizes the immense compromises some Jews decided to make in hopes of survival, and the terrible consequences to their mental health of those decisions.

Commandant Breuer

Commandant Breuer is the head of the concentration camp. A small, neat, and handsome man, he speaks softly and seems kind on the surface. Underneath, he is a sadistic killer. After the prisoners' escape attempt, Breuer's policy of "Choosing" internees for extermination becomes tougher, as he allows other soldiers to begin taking the prisoners to the ovens at their own discretion. Breuer is the incarnation of smiling, quiet evil, known by camp member as the Angel of Death.

Reb Boruch

Reb Boruch is Fayge's father and the rabbi of the village of Viosk. He dies in the camp, electing to send himself to the ovens, to avoid the presence of the Devil.

Grandma Belle

Grandma Belle is Grandpa Will's wife and the mother of Hannah's father. Belle lost family in the Holocaust, but she does not have a major part in the story.

Aaron

Aaron is Hannah's little brother, an active, rather excitable, and mostly sweet boy. His main role in the novel is at the beginning, when the family is celebrating Seder and Aaron must recite from the Haggadah.

Rosemary

Rosemary is Hannah's best friend in New Rochelle. She is not Jewish, and does not appear in the story, although Hannah thinks about her.

Reuven and Tzipporah

Reuven and Tzipporah are the little children of Yitzchak, a boy and girl, respectively. They are described as about three or four years old. Both die in the camp.



Rachel

Rachel is a Viosk villager who wants to be Hannah's best friend. Hannah, thinking of Rosemary, says that Rachel can be her second-best friend. Rachel, who has breathing difficulties, dies on the long journey to the concentration camp.

Shifre, Yente, and Esther

Shifre, Yente, and Esther are all young Viosk villagers who become friends of Hannah, and who are taken to the camp. They all die there.

Hannah's mother and father

Hannah's mother and father are never named. They have roles in the story at the beginning, during the Seder dinner, and at the end, after Hannah returns to the present time. They are too young to have been in the camps, and are not as important to the story as are Hannah's Grandpa Will and his sister, Hannah's elderly Aunt Eva.

Uncle Dan

Dan is an uncle of Hannah's who does not appear in the story, although she thinks of him. Dan did not go to the camps, and he is much easier for Hannah to be around than her Grandpa Will, whose intensity about the Holocaust upsets her.



Objects/Places

The Camp

The Camp is where most of the novel's action takes place. It has no name or specific location and the author writes in her postscript that it is a fictional amalgam of the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. She describes it as a long and low line of barracks surrounded by barbed wire, walls, and watchtowers that hold armed guards. The room in which the women and girls sleep has a row of ovens on one side and wooden sleeping shelves built into a deep recess in the other wall, in stacks of three. The dining room, exercise area, and garbage dump are other places sketchily described in the camp.

New Rochelle

New Rochelle is the hometown of Hannah Stern and her family in New York. It is not described, although Hannah thinks about it during her time in the concentration camp.

Viosk

Viosk is a village in a forest in Europe, possibly in Hungary, where Hannah first goes when she is transported in time back to World War II. Viosk is the village of her family members there, and is the site where a wedding is planned that is interrupted by the arrival of the Nazis, who transport all the villagers to a concentration camp.

Lublin

Lublin is a town where Hannah's alter-ego, Chaya Abramowicz, lived with her parents before they died. The exact location of Lublin is never given.

The Bronx

The Bronx, in New York, is where Hannah's grandparents live. Her family goes there for Seder at her grandparents' house.

Seder

Seder is a ritual feast held by Jews during Passover. In the novel, the Yiddish word "Seder" is defined as "order," and the dinner is described as a ritual meant to recognize the order in the universe.



The Haggadah

The Haggadah is a Jewish religious text from which Hannah's little brother, Aaron, is expected to recite and read, in Yiddish and English, during Seder.

Lilith's Cave

Lilith's Cave is the name the inmates of the concentration camp give to a large wooden gate that leads to the crematoria. The name refers to the cave of the bride of death.

The Holocaust

The Holocaust is the term that describes the extermination of an estimated six million Jewish people by the Nazis during World War II. The camp to which Hannah and the others are transported is one of the centers of this mass killing.

Israel

Israel is the Jewish nation that arose after World War II. In the novel, Shmuel becomes an Israeli politician, and Gitl starts an agency in Israel to help survivors of the Holocaust.



Themes

The Importance of Remembering

In the end, Jane Yolen implies in *The Devil's Arithmetic*, all that a person has left of the past is memory. Everything else is gone, because every moment that is lived becomes part of the past and cannot be reclaimed. Anything that remains from the past, living or non-living, is changed by the passing of time, and the more time that passes, the more those things change. Finally, all that remains is memory, and many problems can arise if the past is forgotten. Yolen explores such ideas through the disinterest shown by her main character, Hannah Stern, concerning the act of remembering. Hannah is young and feels no connection to the traumatic experiences of her elders in the concentration camps of Germany. Only when she is transported by some magical means to the years of World War II and is thrown into one of those Nazi camps does she come to understand the importance of remembering. She realizes that if such horrors are forgotten, the people who suffered are dishonored. To remember also creates strength, as a protection against ever being taken surprise in such a bad way again. During Hannah's time in the camp, she often has trouble remembering her life in New Rochelle. This is symbolic of Hannah's loss of self through the loss of her memory. Without those memories, her entire identity is at risk. Without identity, she would be merely existing rather than actually living. When Hannah returns to the present time and New Rochelle, she speaks with her aunt, who tells her about the camps. Hannah's response is that she remembers. In the novel, Yolen has given her character the chance to go back and see what makes those memories so strong for her elders. The challenge now for Hannah, the reader realizes, is to pass on those crucial memories to future generations.

What Is Heroism?

Generally, people think of heroism as a feat of bravery that involves putting one's life or welfare at risk for a greater cause. Heroism, in other words, is often perceived to begin with a choice made by the hero. In *The Devil's Arithmetic*, no such choice occurs. The people who are sent by the German soldiers to a concentration camp have no way of escape, which the author makes clear on several occasions. This absolute powerlessness is the condition from which the heroism of the interned people emerges. Jane Yolen's theme is that when people are living under the most debased of circumstances, and when they cannot know whether they will live or die from one day to the next, heroism consists of the will to keep going and to retain one's sense of dignity even when the situation seems hopeless. Not everyone in the novel is heroic. Some people crack under the pressure, and lose their will to live. Others compromise their dignity in ways that keep them alive but will forever haunt them. Some, however, never allow their captors the sadistic pleasure of seeing them break down. Even to the point of death, they remain true to their sense of personal honor and worth. No amount of degradation can make them feel they are without value, which is what their torturers want them to feel. Under such unimaginable strain, to remain unbowed and unbeaten is



an amazing achievement. Jane Yolen's story is full of such heroism, which may well be the highest form of that trait.

Cultural Identity

A challenge that has preoccupied humans throughout recorded history is the search for meaning in life. Questions about why we are here and how we can find fulfillment have been answered in many ways over the centuries, but one of the most persistent and powerful responses to such questions is that humans find meaning through honoring, serving, and loving others. The key point in this idea is that people need each other. One person all alone in the world would be meaningless. In spirit, or perhaps in theory, we might love everyone, but in reality it is much more practical to bond to those with whom we have a common history and beliefs. If that history is long and those beliefs are potent, the bonding can create a sense of shared identity that gives purpose to living. This is the situation in which the Jewish characters in *The Devil's Arithmetic* find themselves. Their shared heritage is even more important to them when it becomes the reason for their persecution during World War II. If they lose faith in who they are as a people, they lose their individual identities and become mere, numbered victims of their oppressors. Many of the characters in this novel are determined to avoid that fate. To share the stories of their common heritage, whether going back a few days or going back centuries, is central to their survival. The Nazi atrocities were not simply inflicted upon millions of individuals. They were aimed at an entire culture, a set of religious beliefs, a way of life, a people. In this book, Jane Yolen makes it clear that to survive as one person is to triumph as a civilization. When Hannah Stern, speaking as someone from the future, tells her friends in the camp that the Jewish people will rise again, have their own country, and be admired worldwide, she is assuring them that their sufferings and even their deaths have meaning.



Style

Style

Point of View

This novel is told from the viewpoint of the main character, Hannah Stern. The thoughts and feelings of all other characters are portrayed through what they say and do, rather than what they think. The singular viewpoint of Hannah does not become tedious, because the author includes a great deal of dramatic action, and she essentially splits Hannah's personality in two. Early in the book, Hannah is an everyday girl in contemporary America, but soon, she is transported, through some unexplained feat of time travel, to a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, where she is a different person named Chaya. Eventually, the reader comes to realize that Hannah is reenacting the life of one of her ancestors, Chaya Abramowitz, who died as a young girl in a Nazi camp. Throughout most of the book, the author does not let Hannah fully understand or even fully complete this transformation of her identity. The character's thoughts and memories frequently shift back and forth from that of Hannah to that of Chaya. At the beginning of the novel and at its end, she is completely Hannah, but throughout the bulk of the story, the character has flashes of memory about Hannah that do not fit into the life of Chaya. This uncertainty about her identity turns the novel's viewpoint into an important component of the storyline. It takes on symbolic significance, as the author's tale shows how the attempts by the Nazis to turn their captives into faceless numbers were combated by the internees. Privately, they stress the importance of their own names, their family relationships, and their Jewish heritage. Even so, the horrors of the camps make some of them lose touch with their own identities, as symbolized by Hannah's struggle to remember who she is.

Setting

The story begins in America, although the exact location of New Rochelle, New York, is not revealed right away. Hannah and her immediate family live in New Rochelle, but they soon go to visit her grandparents, who live in the Bronx. When Hannah is transported in time back to World War II, she starts out near a village called Viosk, which is in a forest. At one point, someone mentions another town, which is near the Polish border. This suggests that Viosk could be in Hungary, especially since it takes four days and nights for Hannah and the villagers to be transported by train to an unnamed Nazi concentration camp. The country in which the camp is located is not revealed, but it might be Germany. Most of the book's action takes place in the camp, a confined and terrifying place of death. Its exact location is irrelevant, because this horrible place becomes the whole world to its inmates. They have little or no hope of escape, and cannot guess if they will ever be liberated. Confined by walls, barbed wire, and watchtowers containing armed guards, the internees are so traumatized that they often have trouble even remembering their former lives. In this way, the setting of the



novel is a powerful contributor to the atmosphere of oppression and fear that pervades it. When Hannah finally is transported back to New Rochelle, the return to safety and normalcy comes as an exhilarating release, even to the reader, from the evils of the camp.

Language and Meaning

A number of Yiddish terms are used throughout this novel. Usually, the meanings of such terms are explained, although sometimes the reader must guess the meaning from the context in which the term appears. These words and phrases, which are the most unusual aspect of the language in the novel, help greatly to give the story a distinctly Jewish flavor. This shared language, which is read in religious texts and appears in smatterings throughout conversations, knits together the Jewish characters in the story more powerfully than anything else, except perhaps the experiences of those who are confined in a Nazi concentration camp. For the characters in this book, the use of Yiddish reinforces their religious orientation, their common ancestry, and the heritage they celebrate and revere in stories they tell of the past. In a sense, Yiddish creates a wall that both unites and protects those who understand it. Initially, Hannah does not understand Yiddish, even though her grandparents and other relatives speak it. Later, when she takes on the identity of Chaya, she suddenly understands the language, which draws her deeply into the world of those around her. Readers might feel the same way. Those who do not understand the language will probably still be very interested and involved in the dramatic story, but they also might feel like outside observers compared to the experience of those readers who do understand Yiddish. The power of language to create community is amply demonstrated in this novel.

Structure

This novel has a loop-like structure. It begins in contemporary New York state, and then suddenly shifts to Europe in 1942 for the bulk of the story, and finally returns to New York in the present day. There are no extensive flashbacks, because the main character travels back and forth in time, so that everything happens in the moment, rather than in the past. When the main character, Hannah, is in the past, she does have memories of another time, but these are vague, confused thoughts that do not amount to a structural shift in the story. Physically, the book's structure is straightforward and simple, in that it has nineteen chapters, each of which is numbered but untitled. The last chapter is followed by an Epilogue, which itself is followed by an author's note. There is no Table of Contents, and the only preface to the first chapter is Jane Yolen's dedication of the book to family and friends. The author appears to have deliberately chosen an uncomplicated structure for this story, because Hannah moves through time and often is confused about whether she is Hannah or Chaya. A simple structure avoids needless complications and allows Yolen to concentrate on Hannah's emotional reaction to the horrors she encounters in traveling back to World War II, and the struggle Hannah has to come to terms with her shifting identity.



Quotes

"Outside, where there should have been a long, windowless hall with dark green numbered doors leading into other apartments, there was a greening field and a lowering sky" (Chapter 3, pg. 20.)

"Suddenly a terrible longing for all the people in the dream overcame her and she moaned softly" (Chapter 5, pg. 32.)

"But there was something old-fashioned and unfamiliar about this Chaya Abramowicz, something haunting, like one of the old photographs on Grandma Belle's grand piano" (Chapter 6, pg. 44.)

"The truth was, she was beginning to wonder herself whether she was Hanna and Chaya was the dream of is she was Chaya and Hannah was some kind of mishigaas, some craziness in her mind from the sickness" (Chapter 6, pg. 47-8.)

"She was not Hannah Stern of New Rochelle, at least not anymore, though she still had Hannah's memories" (Chapter 8, pg. 63.)

"I know where they are taking us. I am...I am...from the future" (Chapter 10, pg. 78.)

"The showers were ice cold, but Hannah was so relived it was water—and not the gas she'd expected—that she stood under the sprinklers a long time" (Chapter 11, pg. 93.)

"The barracks they were assigned had a long brick oven along one end and deep trenches on the sides in which sleeping shelves were placed, like triple bunk beds, at impossibly narrow intervals" (Chapter 12, pg. 101.)

"Once again it occurred to her that there was something she was not remembering, something terribly important to her, to all of them" (Chapter 13, pg. 110.)

"She closed her eyes, and lowered herself into the garbage, the baby clutched in her arms" (Chapter 15, pg. 123.)

"Gitl pulled Hannah back against the barrack's wall. Hannah could feel the fear threatening to scream out of her, so she dropped the shoes and put both hands over her mouth, effectively gagging herself" (Chapter 17, pg. 148.)

"If this had been in a book, she thought, the skies would be weeping, the swallows mourning in the smokestack" (Chapter 18, pg. 154-55.)

"Nevertheless," Hannah said, "I remember. And you—you must remember, too, so that whoever of us survives this place will carry the message into that future" (Chapter 18, pg. 157.)

Topics for Discussion

Earlier in the novel, in New Rochelle and during the part that is set in 1942, Hannah displays a knack for storytelling. She often draws on movies, fairytales, or books to tell these stories, usually fascinating the young people around her. In the context of this novel, what is the significance of Hannah's storytelling?

Shmuel's bride-to-be, Fayge, and the young girl, Esther, both become dispirited in the camp. When Esther turns away from advice Rivka is giving about how to survive, and Fayge will not participate in the escape attempt, what point is the author making about coping with the oppressive conditions of the camp?

Why do you think Commandant Breuer periodically conducts a "Choosing," during which he visits the barracks and selects who will go to their deaths? What does this say about his nature, and the nature of those who victimize others?

What do you think occurs when Hannah travels back in time? Does it actually happen? Is it a dream or an extended act of memory? Does it matter?

Why does Grandpa Will get so badly upset by old pictures of the Holocaust? Others in the family suffered through the same troubles, but they do not get out of control. What is wrong with him?

Early during the villagers' internment in the camp, Gitl declares that she will survive. She does survive. How do you think she knew that she could make it through the horrors of the camp?

What is the significance of Hannah not knowing whether she is Hannah or Chaya? On a literal level in the story something is happening to her, but something else is happening psychologically. What is it?