

# Gentleman's Agreement Short Guide

## Gentleman's Agreement by Laura Z. Hobson

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# Characters

Phil Green could easily be the man next door, the typical American, unaware of many of the problems in his society. In order to carry out a newspaper assignment about Jewish life in America, he pretends to be Jewish. As a result of his newly assumed identity, he realizes that discrimination is more far-reaching than he ever suspected.

Lonely after his wife's death, he becomes romantically linked with Kathy, a divorcee, whose resentment of his work surfaces when she has to adjust to his various aliases. While trying to convince Green that she is really not bigoted, she begins to display the characteristics of a latent bigot.

As he continues his research, Green discovers that a surprising number of the people around him, including his family and friends, harbor deep prejudices. As a result of this discovery, his newspaper story emerges even more powerfully than he anticipated.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Gentleman's Agreement delves into the imperfections of society, specifically the prejudices of the American mainstream in the 1940s. Keenly aware of subtle forms of discrimination, she describes the latent anti-Semitism rampant in America. Hobson focuses on people who do not regard themselves as anti-Semites, and who deny charges of bigotry with the familiar rationalization that "Some of my best friends are Jews." Hobson attempts to show that many of these people are enemies of the Jews as much as are overt antiSemites.

Social problems are highlighted as Phil Green pursues his reporter's assignment posing as a Jew. Green discovers that Jews are barred admission to various country clubs and hotel resorts as well as prohibited from buying homes in some neighborhoods. He learns the extent to which there is a "gentlemen's agreement" existing in the United States concerning how to treat Jews.

The major theme in Gentleman's Agreement is the need to recognize dominant prejudices and to create a society where people are accepted for what they really are. The story appeals for mutual respect and tolerance for all people. Hobson emphasizes that prejudices are not natural, but learned: "We are born in innocence ... in an unstained purity of heart."

## Techniques

Hobson's techniques are straightforward. She incorporates a third person omniscient narrator and relies heavily on dialogue. The quality of the dialogue is inconsistent. Frequently realistic, there are occasions when Hobson attributes long-winded lines to her characters, whose speech emerges as artificial and somewhat trite.

The reader's attention is held more by the subject matter than by the author's simple writing technique. Some of the situations are too obvious, and when Green's family and acquaintances reveal their anti-Semitic reactions, the plot seems to become artificially contrived. The romance between Kathy and Phil is not realistically presented and the ending is not satisfying. Predictably, Kathy realizes the error in her ways and somehow readjusts her thinking as she returns to Green. The novel's content, rather than its literary technique, makes it a notable work.

# Adaptations

The most famous adaptation of Hobson's work was a 20th Century Fox film, *Gentleman's Agreement*. The movie, starring Gregory Peck, Dorothy McGuire, and John Garfield, with a screenplay by Moss Hart, earned Hobson a six-figure sum. Following the text closely, the film was a powerful expose of anti-Semitism and increased the popularity of Hobson. It won the Academy Award for Best Picture; Elia Kazan won the Academy Award for Best Director; Celeste Holm won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress.

## Literary Precedents

In Lincoln Steffens's *Autobiography* (1931), the author's experience parallels that of Phil Green. Steffens describes how, as a young reporter, he is sent by his editor to speak to the proprietor of a hotel, whose practice it is to exclude Jewish clientele. He emerges from the interview with firsthand knowledge of the existence of anti-Semitism in America.

Similarly, in Ludwig Lewisohn's autobiography *Up Stream* (1922), the author narrates his personal encounters with anti-Semitism. Upon entering Columbia University as a graduate student, he is informed that there are limitations for Jews in the teaching profession, and he is advised to change his professional aspirations.

Anti-Semitism was also dealt with in fictional works preceding *Gentleman's Agreement*. In Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Robert Cohn's character is molded by the anti-Semitic experiences he encounters as a student at Princeton. As a result, he develops a marked inferiority complex and in order to compensate for this, he becomes a boxer.

Although anti-Semitism had been depicted in fiction, and consciously attacked in Jewish autobiographies, Hobson performed a critical role by using the novel to dramatize the full extent of the problem.

## Related Titles

Consistently ahead of her time, Hobson continues rallying for the minority, the ostracized, or the underdog.

*Consenting Adult* (1975) is a daring, enlightening book advocating the acceptance of homosexuals. Hobson explores the issue by examining the impact of a young man's homosexuality on his entire family.

The major theme of *Consenting Adult* is the freedom of expression and the right to be different in a society that encourages conformity. The mother's pain and gradual acceptance of her son's homosexuality is basic to the story. Also central is the protagonist's entrapment by existing mores and his eventual emancipation.

Jeff, the young man who informs his family that he is a homosexual, withdraws, and unable to accept the family's reaction, leaves home to enter the world on his own. Hurt, repressed and frightened by his father's Victorian attitudes, Jeff endures years in agony.

Ultimately, he fights back and leaves his clandestine environment to join the newly-formed gay movement. He even summons the courage to introduce his male lover to Tessa, his mother.

Tessa sympathizes with Jeff and tries unsuccessfully to get her husband Ken to accept their troubled son. To assist her own understanding of Jeff's situation, she plunges into research. With maternal love, she prods him on, constantly encouraging him and praising him for his bravery. By contrast, Ken is unwilling or unable to establish a relationship with his son. Ken dies before the problem is solved, but Tessa lives to witness the maturity and finally the liberation of her own son following the Stonewall Riots.

The story concentrates on Tessa's point of view, a wise strategic choice by Hobson because the mother is caught between her son and husband, both of whom she loves and tries to understand. The reader gains insight into the complexity of the conflict and is better able to understand its full, tragic dimensions. The few books geared to a popular audience and written before *Consenting Adult* that discussed homosexuality focused on the partners in a homosexual relationship, rather than the relationship's impact on the family unit.

Most of Hobson's other works deal with similar social themes. In *The Trespassers* (1943), her first novel, Hobson tells of the failure on the part of America to help the European refugees prior to World War II. Similar to *Voyage of the Damned*, by Gordon Thomas and Max M. Witts, it exposes the evils of the quota system for immigrants. As a result of the quota system, thousands of Jews perished who might otherwise have been rescued. *The Tenth Month* (1971), another courageous undertaking, deals with another significant social problem, an unwed mother. *Over and Above* (1979) is about a Jew raised as an agnostic. The issue of the possibly conflicting loyalties of American Jews





(towards America and Israel) is treated. Hobson, herself, opposed the establishment of Palestine. In the book, the Zionist devotion of one character, Eph, causes a breakup with his girlfriend. Living during a period of growing popularity for religious sects, Eph develops a fanatical attitude about the Middle East situation. The conflict between Eph's religious ideas, American citizenship, and support for Israel permeate this novel. In *The Celebrity* (1951), Hobson depicts the rise and sudden fame of an author, and *Untold Millions* (1982) concerns the love affair between a journalist and a struggling novelist. These two works both revolve around writing careers and are somewhat autobiographical in nature.



# Copyright Information

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