

Our Eddie Short Guide

Our Eddie by Sulamith Ish-kishor

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Contents

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



Overview

Our Eddie sensitively explores the complex themes of mental and physical illness, child abuse, conflicts between tradition and change, and the universal dilemma of setting priorities among values and allocating time to career or family. Ish-Kishor weaves these themes into a compelling story about an honorable family, and the plot and remarkably authentic characters capture the reader's interest. The thoughtprovoking ending forces the reader to reach his or her own personal conclusions.

Many problems Mr. Ezekiel Raphel's family faces are universal ones, but Mr. Raphel is motivated by two specific values: a difficult and demanding religious code, and a dream of improving the world by educating underprivileged children. Ish-Kishor shows that tragedy can result when a person is obsessed with imposing personal goals upon others, especially when he allows those goals to take precedence over the needs of self and family.

About the Author

One of seven children, Sulamith IshKishor was born in 1896, in London, England, to Ephraim and Fanny Ish-Kishor. She attended school in London until she moved to New York in 1909 at age thirteen. Educated in London and then in New York, she later graduated from Hunter College in New York City with a specialization in history and language. She achieved considerable stature as an author during her lifetime and died on June 23, 1977, in New York City.

Ish-Kishor began her writing career at the age of five and had published some of her poems in British periodicals by the age of ten. Her literary efforts range from well-received fiction for children and young adults to carefully crafted nonfiction for children, young adults, and adults. In all her work, she exhibits a thorough knowledge of Judaism and Jewish history coupled with an ability to tell a story in a style that triggers the reader's empathy. In addition to writing books, Ish-Kishor has contributed to periodicals such as the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *Menorah Journal*, writing on a variety of topics related to Judaism, music, art, and theater.

Her best-known work of fiction is *Our Eddie*, which was a Newbery Honor Book in 1970. Ish-Kishor received the Charles and Bertie Schwartz Award from the Jewish Book Council of America in 1964, recognizing *A Boy of Old Prague* as the best juvenile book on a Jewish theme. In 1972 *The Master of Miracle: A New Novel of the Golem* also won this award. The American Library Association listed *A Boy of Old Prague* as a Notable Book in 1963.

Setting

The story begins in a section of northeast London, where rather small, inexpensive homes sit close together and look exactly alike. Mr. Raphael fails to obtain moral and economic support for teaching Judaism to poor and immigrant children, and his professional relationships with colleagues and potential donors deteriorate because of his increasing mental problems. He returns to New York, the city to which he and his wife had emigrated from Russia several years earlier. Most of the narrative takes place in the Bronx, where Mr. Raphael's wife and four children join him in a dingy, unpleasant apartment after enduring a difficult passage in the steerage section of a ship.

The book covers a three-year period that begins shortly after World War II.



Social Sensitivity

The Raphael children must deal with issues and concerns that are commonplace in any society where adults' dedication to humanitarian ideals and career goals conflicts with personal commitments to their immediate families. This conflict frequently affects persons in service professions such as the clergy, medicine, research, and education, where the overwhelming needs and supplications of humankind overshadow other necessities.

Ish-Kishor presents a loving Jewish family with a strong commitment to morality and religious traditions. The lively, bright, academically successful, and socially adept Raphael children would be a source of pride to many parents. But Mr. Raphael's increasingly obsessive behavior leads him to neglect and abuse his family, and he finally suffers a mental breakdown.

This realistic treatment of a family weakened by multiple sclerosis, poverty, and a lack of adult support leaves the reader with little hope. Unlike many contemporary "problem novels," which focus on a single problem that can be solved through flashes of insight, this novel leaves many problems openended, with no literary justice in sight.

Some readers may be concerned about the emotional violence endured by the family, and about young adults reading novels that leave little hope for the future. The book, however, may alert young readers to the problem of abuse and neglect in contemporary society.



Literary Qualities

The outstanding attributes of *Our Eddie* are its uncompromising, but not belabored, depiction of reality; its lifelike portrayal of characters; and its sensitive treatment of the common problems faced by the Raphel family. Families are hurt when one parent refuses to accept responsibilities, and Ish-Kishor explores the complex reasons that prompt Mr. Raphel's distressing behavior toward his wife and children. She reveals the subtle interactions between cause and effect, right and wrong, and religion and psychology that lie beneath the family conflicts.

Ish-Kishor portrays Eddie as a victim of naturalistic forces. Mr. Raphel's mental illness and his dedication to a low-paying job condemn Eddie to poverty and keep the boy from realizing his intellectual potential. Eddie's genetically inherited multiple sclerosis forces him out of a job and ultimately leads to his death. Ish-Kishor suggests that Eddie has no choices in life; when, finally, he is faced with the decision of whether or not to undergo a life-threatening operation, his father's indifference encourages him to decide in favor of the surgery that takes his life.

Ish-Kishor balances the tragedy of her plot against the simple integrity of the words and attitudes expressed by the young, innocent narrators. She uses the engaging narrative voices of Sybil and Hal to draw the reader deep into the psyche of a troubled family. Although Ish-Kishor uses little symbolism in her narrative, she does employ one overarching motif in *Our Eddie*. The multiple sclerosis that debilitates Mrs. Raphel and threatens to do the same to Eddie symbolizes the inevitable deterioration of the Raphel family. In what might be seen as a reckless death-wish, Eddie chooses to undergo the dangerous operation for his multiple sclerosis; however, just as he has been unable to escape the shackles imposed on him by his family, so too is he unable to defeat this genetically inherited disease.



Themes and Characters

Mr. and Mrs. Ezekiel Raphael have four children: Eddie, Lilie, Sybil, and Thad.

Eddie and Mr. Raphael are the central characters; Sybil and Hal Kent, the children's young American friend, are important as narrators and interpreters of the story.

Mr. Kent and Mr. Raphael present an interesting contrast as fathers. Mr. Kent is a successful executive who, even though he is usually away on business, provides his son with the security of love, material necessities, and a good education. Hal's only stated complaint is that Doris, the maid, serves small food portions. On the other hand, Mr. Raphael dedicates his life to teaching Judaism to poor children, rejecting many offers to teach children of wealthier parents and to earn a much better income. As a result of this decision, he does not spend time with his family or provide them with basic necessities such as adequate food and education. Mr. Raphael has neither the time nor the energy to be concerned with his wife's increasing debilitation by multiple sclerosis or his children's welfare. For example, when Hal Kent takes a long bus trip to school to tell Mr. Raphael that his son Thad is missing, Mr. Raphael refuses to interrupt his lesson to find the boy. When he finally arrives home, he beats Thad for disappearing "intentionally" and beats thirteen-year-old Eddie for not watching his brother carefully enough.

Mr. Raphael's peers consider him a creative and intelligent teacher. Because his teaching career takes precedence over all other interests, Mr. Raphael ignores his family and repeatedly breaks promises to them. He professes a dedication to Talmudic traditions but is observed to break those traditions for the sake of conflicting interests. His second love, Zionism, brings additional hardships on the family. Either because of a fall from a bicycle, as one doctor suggests, or because of a nervous breakdown resulting in paranoia, Mr. Raphael becomes increasingly difficult to live with. He treats his family with cruel callousness, beating and verbally abusing his children.

Although Mrs. Raphael and the children all suffer because of their father's mental illness, Eddie suffers the most. Mr. Raphael cannot accept Eddie's individuality, and beats the boy with a stick when Eddie displeases him. Eddie rebels, first by refusing to be the scholar his father expects and then, after Mr. Raphael sails to America, by leaving school at age fifteen to earn money for the family's survival. Later he steals, first to support his family and later to finance his education. When he works for a lady's clothing store, he brings home small luxury items for his mother and sisters. In order to provide for his own education, Eddie keeps twenty dollars of the box office receipts from a play his father's students perform. Eddie tries to justify this theft, reasoning that he has worked as a cashier without pay and recalling that his father once bought himself a bicycle with money Eddie won instead of applying it toward Eddie's education. When Eddie is seventeen, Mr. Raphael replaces physical abuse with mental abuse, expressing scorn for Eddie's hope of becoming a medical researcher: "You cannot be a medical researcher ... You have not the brains."



Sybil narrates the major portion of the story, picking up the thread when Hal's family leaves London. She is the third child and a girl, so Mr. Raphael rarely notices her. A good student, she is hurt when her father promises to give her a book if she reads it but then gives it to Eddie instead because "he is a boy." She is a caring and sensitive character who attempts to find reasons to explain the unpleasant events she experiences.

Mrs. Raphael becomes a cripple and Eddie dies before Mr. Raphael decides to take time for his family. But the future remains cloudy because of Mr. Raphael's mental illness and Mrs. Raphael's multiple sclerosis. There is little hope that Sybil or Mr. Raphael will be able to pull the remaining family up from poverty, although Ish-Kishor does suggest that Sybil may have an opportunity to improve her life. Six months after Eddie's death, Hal returns to America and invites Sybil to go to the opera with him.

When she asks her father's permission, he exhibits a changed outlook by allowing Sybil to go and stating that "The Law ... The Law is to live by."



Topics for Discussion

1. Mr. Raphael devotes much more time, interest, and concern to his teaching than he does to his wife and children. How does he feel about his family?

2. Hal's parents, especially his father, appear to spend very little time with him, and Doris provides for his daily needs.

Nevertheless, Hal's relationship with his parents appears to be much closer than the relationship of the Raphael children with their father. Why?

3. Although the Raphaels appear to treat their children equally, Eddie has more difficulties adapting to his life than do the other children. Why?

4. Sybil indicates that, although she excuses Eddie, she thinks he is in the wrong. Eddie, on the other hand, does not believe that his actions are wrong because he is not responsible for them.

To what wrongdoings is Sybil referring?

Which attitude would Hal consider more acceptable, Eddie's or Sybil's? Why?

5. Sybil says that she wants to tell the story herself because she does not "want to forget how it really happened." Why does she stress how it really happened instead of why it really happened?

6. In order to make an outstanding, unselfish contribution to humankind, people usually must make great personal sacrifices. Is Mr. Raphael justified in choosing to devote himself to humankind rather than to his family?

7. Throughout the story, both Eddie and Mr. Raphael make choices about how they will live their lives. In what ways are the father and son alike in their choices?

In what ways are they different?

8. What effects do you think the family tragedies will have on the future of the Raphael children? Do you see any hope for Lillie, Sybil, and Thad?

9. Uncle Mark, Aunt Sara, and their daughter Claire appear to have all the advantages Mrs. Raphael desires for her own family, yet Uncle Mark's family may not be quite as happy as Mrs. Raphael imagines. How does Uncle Mark's family serve as a mirror image of the Raphael family?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Mr. Raphael, a teacher, resolves the conflict between devotion to immediate family and devotion to humankind by focusing upon the latter. Choose one other profession that demands similar choices; research the life of a worldrenowned member of that profession and discuss what choices that person had to make, what the person chose, and the effects upon the person's immediate family.

2. Considering world events of the late 1930s and early 1940s, what particular reasons would have prompted Ezekiel Raphael to devote his life to educating Jewish children about their faith? Why is support of Zionism so important to Mr. Raphael and other Jews? For what reasons do you believe Mr. Raphael is justified or unjustified in making the choices he does?

3. Roles of women and children have changed markedly since the 1940s.

What social and economic factors play an important part in determining the power Mr. Raphael has over his family?

4. Authors frequently pit good against evil in their novels. Explain whether or not Ish-Kishor clearly defines good or evil. Does she encourage the reader to like or dislike certain characters?

5. If you had been Eddie Raphael, what might you have done differently to change the course of your life?

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"Review." *Horn Book* (August 1969): 417. Describes *Our Eddie* as "a rather daring novel" with memorable characters and "a haunting quality."

"Review." *Library Journal* (May 15, 1969): 2114. Susan Halbreich comments that the content of *Our Eddie* "catapults this novel way beyond the norm of juvenile books that center on this period."



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