# The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones Study Guide

## The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones by Julie Orringer

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# Introduction

The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones by Julie Orringer was first published in the literary magazine, *Zoetrope: All Story*, in 2003. It was reprinted in Orringer's first collection of short stories, *How to Breathe Underwater* (2003). Orringer has been widely praised for her ability to convey the trials and tribulations of adolescent girls, as well as their ability to emerge successfully from the challenges they face. In The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones a young Jewish girl from New York named Rebecca goes to stay for the summer with Esty, her cousin. Esty and her family are members of a Hasidic sect that has strict religious beliefs and practices which are quite new to Rebecca, who has been raised in a secular environment. As the summer wears on, Rebecca has to deal with her developing awareness of religion and God, as well as her emerging sexuality. These issues come together one hot July Shabbos and are connected with a forbidden book and the disturbing presence of an attractive young man.

# Author Biography

**Nationality 1:** American

**Birthdate:** 1973

Julie Orringer was born on June 12, 1973, in Miami, Florida. Both her parents were third-year medical students at the University of Miami. When Orringer was four, the family lived in Boston. When she was six, they moved to New Orleans, where she lived until she was twelve. She attended a private school, and being one of the few Jewish children in the class, she felt like an outsider. She loved reading and writing and thought she might like to write novels someday.

In 1986, the family moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Orringer attended a public school from eighth grade. The book that most influenced her at the time was Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which she read in high school. During Orringer's school years, her mother was fighting a long battle with breast cancer, the disease that eventually killed her. Orringer says this experience gave her an early awareness that she might lose her mother, and this feeling of insecurity, loss, and the possibility of death has colored her stories.

Orringer attended Cornell University, where some of her professors began to encourage her to pursue a career as a writer. During her junior year, she started reading all the contemporary fiction she could find, including Raymond Carver, Charles Baxter, Mona Simpson, Tobias Wolff, Lorrie Moore, and Alice Munro.

Orringer graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from Cornell in 1994. She decided to continue her study of writing at Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa and graduated with a master of fine arts degree in 1996.

After graduation, Orringer moved to San Francisco where she undertook a variety of non-writing-related jobs in order to make money while reserving her creative energies for her fiction. In 1999, Orringer received a Stegner Fellowship in the Creative Writing Program at Stanford University. By this time, her stories were being published in literary magazines and books, including the *Barcelona Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Yale Review*, *The Paris Review*, *The Pushcart Prize Anthology*, *Best New American Voices 2001*, and *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 2002*. The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones was first published in *Zoetrope: All Story*. Nine of Orringer's stories, including The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones, were published in the collection, *How to Breathe Underwater*, by Knopf in 2003. After graduating from the Stegner Program, Orringer held a three-year lectureship in fiction writing at Stanford.

As of 2006, Orringer is the Distinguished Visiting Writer at St. Mary's College of California. She lives with her husband, the writer Ryan Harty, in San Francisco.

# Plot Summary

“The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones” begins on a hot Friday afternoon in the middle of July in upstate New York. Rebecca, the narrator, a girl of about twelve or thirteen, is staying at the home of her uncle and aunt, the Adelsteins. Rebecca has been sent away while her mother recovers from the death of her infant son. That was six weeks ago, but she is still in hospital suffering from an infection and depression.

Rebecca's relatives are Hasidic Jews, whereas Rebecca's parents, who live three hundred miles away in Manhattan, New York City, are secular Jews. Rebecca's older cousin Esty, who is about thirteen, is very pious and tries to persuade Rebecca to be more observant of Jewish religious rituals and other customs.

Even though they are not supposed to be doing so, Rebecca and Esty wade into a lake and swim fully clothed out to a raft. They watch as a teenage boy comes along the lake road. He hides something under the porch steps of a house owned by the Perelmans, who are away until August. Esty recognizes the boy as Dovid Frankel and tells Rebecca that he and his family will be coming to Shabbos (Sabbath, the day of rest at the end of the week) dinner that evening at the Adelsteins.

After Dovid leaves, the girls swim ashore and investigate. Under the porch they find a paper bag and inside it is a book titled, *Essence of Persimmon: Eastern Sexual Secrets for Western Lives*. They read some of it but do not really understand it, and Esty says it is a sin to read it. But they agree to take the book home and hide it in the top shelf of their closet. Esty says they will not look at it, because that would be a sin.

They ride their bicycles home, hide the book, and help Rebecca's Aunt Malka with the preparations for Shabbos dinner. Rebecca makes a brief call to her mother in the hospital, but her mother sounds depressed, and their conversation ends before Rebecca has a chance to feel much connection with her.

At six-thirty, the female guests start arriving for Shabbos, bringing food and drink. The men are still at shul (a Yiddish word for synagogue). When Dovid arrives, Rebecca studies him carefully.

Everyone gathers around the table and the men sing “Shalom Aleichem.” As they serve the food, the two girls keep their eyes on Dovid, although sometimes Rebecca looks at Mrs. Handelman, Dovid's older sister, who is pregnant. Rebecca's five little step-cousins scream as they run around and underneath the table. It is all very disorderly, quite different from the quiet dinners Rebecca is used to at home. At the end of the meal they all sing in Hebrew the Birkat Hamazon (a grace after meals), which again is something that does not happen at Rebecca's home.

Uncle Shimon then tells a story about a Jewish family thirty miles away whose house burned down in June. The only thing that was not destroyed was the mezuzah (scriptural passages in a box placed on doorposts). It was later discovered that there

was an imperfection in the mezuzah; some of the letters of one of the words were smudged and misshapen. Uncle Shimon suggests that is why the house burned. Dovid expresses skepticism about this idea, and Uncle Shimon does not respond directly to his question, simply replying that he makes sure he has their mezuzah checked every year.

After dinner, Dovid steps outside, and after a while Rebecca follows him. For a few minutes they make desultory conversation about whether a smudged mezuzah causes a house to burn, and whether they believe in God at all. After Rebecca says that sometimes she hopes there is not a God because he would know all her secret thoughts, Dovid lets on that the Adelsteins are scared of her. They think that she may lead their children away from the orthodox religious path. This revelation surprises Rebecca, since she assumed the influence would be the other way round. Dovid then says that he is not scared of her, and he touches her arm. She knows that as an Orthodox Jew, he is not supposed to touch any woman who is not his mother or sister. For a moment she thinks he is going to kiss her, but then he walks back toward the house.

That night, Esty will not talk to Rebecca. She is angry and jealous because Rebecca was outside with Dovid. At night, Rebecca lies awake. She knows that Dovid was doing something against the rules, and she wonders whether she is really becoming the kind of orthodox religious girl she has been pretending to be during her stay at the Adelsteins.

In the middle of the night, Rebecca wakes and finds that Esty has gone from her bed and is in the closet, reading the forbidden book. Realizing that Esty is in love with Dovid, she tries to reassure her that nothing happened between her and Dovid. They agree to read the book for a little while and look at the drawings. They read descriptions of orgasm, masturbation, and body parts including the clitoris, but they have little idea of what it all means. Esty refuses to believe that Dovid has read it all. They close the book and hide it away again, promising to repent in the morning. During the night, Rebecca thinks about the judgment of God.

In the morning, Rebecca wakes before her cousin and steps out on the porch where she finds her uncle. She asks him whether, when a person dies, the family is supposed to have the mezuzah checked. Uncle Shimon replies that he was told by his rebbe (rabbi) that sometimes bad things just happen; people do not always know why Hashem (God) acts as he does.

Rebecca keeps the Shabbos all day, doing no work, not even turning on a light or sewing. She is not allowed to call her mother. Esty spends most of the day alone and prays a lot and studies the Torah (the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses).

Aunt Malka tells Rebecca that her mother sounds better and that Rebecca will be going home soon. She tells Rebecca about mikveh, a spiritually cleansing ritual bath. According to Aunt Malka, the mikveh is especially important after a woman gives birth, even if the baby dies. She says it is a commandment for adult females to perform this

bath every month unless a woman is pregnant for it is a ritual purification after menstruation and childbirth. Aunt Malka instructs Rebecca to tell her mother how important the mikveh is. Rebecca goes off alone and lies in the grass. She wants to know what God wants her to do, and she wants to do it.

At night, the family gathers for Havdalah, the blessings recited at the conclusion of Shabbos, separating the holy day from the other days of the week. They stand in a circle outside and sing to God, smell spices, and drink wine. Finally they sing about Eliyahu Hanavi (known to Christians as Elijah), the prophet who will arrive someday and bring the Messiah.

Rebecca calls her mother. Her father answers the phone and tells her that she can probably come home in a couple of weeks. Rebecca mentions Aunt Malka's instruction about the ritual bath. There is silence at the end of the line for a moment, before Rebecca's father asks to speak to her aunt. Although Aunt Malka is close by, Rebecca has an uneasy feeling about what might ensue, and she says her aunt has gone out for milk. Her father requests that Aunt Malka call him.

That evening, Esty leaves the dinner table without touching her food and goes to her room, where Rebecca finds her reading the erotic book. Esty tells her to explain to her mother that she has a headache and is laying down.

After dinner, as Rebecca washes the dishes, she is angry and worried about her cousin, and she also feels fear and guilt for not doing what God wants her to do. Seeing Esty leave the house and run down the yard and into the road, Rebecca runs after her. Esty has an envelope in her hand. She tells Rebecca that she has written a note to Dovid, telling him that if he wants his book back, he must meet her at the Perelmans' house the following night. Rebecca tells Esty that is forbidden, but Esty will not listen. She tells Rebecca to go back to the house and pretend Esty is in bed. Back in her bedroom, Rebecca tries to pray. After a while Esty returns, having delivered the letter.

The following day the entire family goes blueberry-picking. Esty is in a good mood and acts as if nothing unusual has happened between her and Rebecca. At home that night, Rebecca's father Alan calls Aunt Malka, who talks to him in private. When she returns, she looks as if she has had an argument or been reproached by Alan over the matter of the ritual bath. But she insists to the girls that people have to do what is right, even when others are doing otherwise. Esty takes this as a sign that she is right in her actions regarding Dovid.

At twelve-thirty that night, Esty takes the book and is about to slip out of the quiet house when Rebecca insists on going with her. Esty agrees on one condition, that if they are caught, Rebecca must take the blame. Rebecca agrees. They reach the Perelmans' backyard and wait for Dovid, who arrives at one o'clock and asks for his book. Esty shows him the package but does not hand it over. She tells him that looking at such pictures is a sin, that there are many rules for when people can have sex. Then she kisses him, and the book falls from her hand. Rebecca picks it up. She takes it to the

lake and wades in. She takes off her clothes, wades in deeper and floats on her back. She lets the book fall into the water and drop to the bottom.

# Characters

## Esty Adelstein

Esty Adelstein, who is about thirteen or fourteen years old, is Rebecca's older cousin. Her name was formerly Erica, but after her mother became an Orthodox Jew, Erica's name was changed to Esther, a change that seemed to affect her personality. As Erica, she was a mischievous girl, talking back to her mother and doing naughty things such as throwing bits of paper at old ladies in the synagogue. But when her mother took her to Israel, Esther repented her former ways and became pious. She spends a lot of her time praying and studying the Torah and telling her cousin Rebecca that she and her mother should be more observant of Jewish religious rituals and customs. But ironically, it is Esty, in her willingness to read the book *Essence of Persimmon: Eastern Sexual Secrets for Western Lives* and in her boldness in making a nocturnal appointment with Dovid and daring to kiss him, who shows herself to be more reckless, less concerned with following the precepts of her religion than her supposedly more secular cousin Rebecca. Although she may not realize it, Esty is somewhat hypocritical in her attitudes, doing exactly what she wants while presenting a pious exterior.

## Alan

Alan, Rebecca's father, does not appear directly in the story, but he speaks to his daughter and to Aunt Malka on the telephone. His conversation with Rebecca shows that he has an easy, comfortable relationship with her. But he is angry with Malka for telling Rebecca to inform her mother about the importance of the mikveh, the ritual bath. It appears that Alan has strong views about how he wishes his daughter to be raised and does not take kindly to what he regards as interference.

## Dovid Frankel

Dovid Frankel, a teenage boy who attends the Shabbos dinner at the home of the Adelsteins, is tall and tanned, and both Rebecca and Esty are fascinated by him. Esty believes she is in love with him. Although Dovid comes from an Orthodox family, he shows signs of rejecting his religion. He does not believe that smudged letters in a mezuzah could be the cause of a family's house fire, and he expresses his frustration at such beliefs by going outside and kicking at the metal clothesline frame. Dovid also secretly possesses a book about eastern sexual techniques, and he deliberately touches Rebecca on the arm, even though as an Orthodox Jew he is not supposed to touch a woman who is not his mother or sister.

## Lev Handelman

Lev Handelman is Mrs. Handelman's husband.

## Mrs. Handelman

Mrs. Handelman is Dovid Frankel's older sister. She is eighteen years old and is pregnant.

## Aunt Malka

Aunt Malka, Rebecca's aunt, was formerly Marla Vincent, a set dresser for the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto. Then she got divorced from her husband, and she and her daughter, then called Erica, went to live in Israel for a year. In Jerusalem, she met Shimon and became an Orthodox rather than secular Jew. She married Shimon and returned to the United States, changing her name from Marla to Malka. She credits her new religion with helping her to recover from her divorce. Aunt Malka now raises her large family (Shimon had five children by his former wife) according to Orthodox principles. She busies herself preparing the Shabbos dinner and organizing a family trip to pick blackberries.

## Rebecca

Rebecca is a young girl of about twelve or thirteen, and is the narrator of the story. She lives in Manhattan, New York City, and her parents are secular Jews. When her mother's baby dies in infancy, Rebecca is sent to live with her aunt and uncle in upstate New York. Her relatives are Orthodox Jews, and while she stays with them Rebecca feels pressure from her cousin Esty, and from within herself, to be more observant of the Jewish religion. At home in Manhattan, Rebecca was a mischievous and adventurous girl, admitting to stealing naked-lady playing cards from a street vendor and kissing a boy from the swim team behind the bleachers. But her life changes during the summer. She and Esty spend much time praying, studying the Torah, and observing dietary laws and other Orthodox rituals and customs. These customs are quite unfamiliar to Rebecca, since in the more informal atmosphere at home she is more used to going to movies or eating a Chinese dinner. Over the summer Rebecca begins to think seriously about moral and religious questions. She wonders about the nature of God's justice, and at some moments she feels a sense of God's presence, although she is not sure what this might signify. She develops a desire to do God's will. At the end of the story she shows she has the maturity to make a moral decision of her own, as she lets the forbidden book about sexuality fall to the bottom of the lake.

## Uncle Shimon

Uncle Shimon, Rebecca's uncle, is an Orthodox Jew and has lived in Israel. His first wife, with whom he had five children, died, and after meeting Malka in Jerusalem, he quickly remarried. Shimon appears to be a contented man who takes his religion seriously. He believes that each person is responsible for his relationship with God, and although his beliefs might be considered narrow, he also possesses a kind of spiritual

humility. He does not believe, for example, that it is always possible to know the ways of God or why God allows certain things, even bad things, to happen.

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# Themes

## Secular versus Religious Beliefs and Lifestyles

The story presents the tensions between two different ways of life within the Jewish communities in New York state. Rebecca, although she is Jewish, has been raised in a secular environment, without religious observance. She is not used to observing Jewish customs and rituals. The relatives with whom she stays are the opposite. They are part of a Hasidic Jewish community which rigorously observes all aspects of its faith and is suspicious of outsiders. This wariness of the world beyond the borders of their community is apparent when Dovid Frankel tells Rebecca that some of the people in the area are scared of her, believing that since she comes from worldly Manhattan, she may show her young cousins a fashion magazine—the orthodox community has a strict dress code that involves long-sleeved blouses and long skirts for women even in hot weather—or give them the wrong foods or tell them something they should not hear. It was the same, Dovid says, when the Adelsteins first moved there. Since they were newcomers, their orthodox neighbors did not trust them. The picture that emerges is of a rather closed community that distrusts outsiders and is protective of its own religious traditions and way of life. But this works the other way, too. Rebecca's father, a secular Jew, reacts negatively when he thinks that Aunt Malka has been trying to talk Rebecca into adopting orthodox practices. It appears there is a gap between Orthodox and secular Jewish worlds that is hard to bridge.

Rebecca in a sense is that bridge. The longer she stays at the Adelsteins, the more she is influenced by her religious environment. Esty nags her about the virtues of observing of Orthodox Jewish customs, and she joins with her cousin in studying the Torah and praying. At first Rebecca just goes through the motions, pretending to be pious as she knows doing so is expected of her. When she listens to Uncle Shimon explain his belief that there is a connection between a house fire and a smudged mezuzah, she expresses her thoughts about it in an open-minded way, beginning, “If there is a God who can see inside mezuzahs.” The key word is “if.” Her tone suggests she neither believes the idea nor disbelieves it, and she is also sufficiently free of the constraints of religious faith to admit to Dovid that sometimes she hopes that God does not exist.

However, Uncle Shimon's words do set her wondering, late at night, about weighty concepts such as the judgment of God. In this way, gradually, Rebecca begins to develop genuine religious feelings, although she does not believe that she fully understands them or their implications: “I know I've felt a kind of holy swelling in my chest, a connection to something larger than myself. I wonder if this is proof of something, if this is God marking me somehow.”

Rebecca's developing religious awareness is a personal one, based more on her own thoughts, feelings, and experiences than on the teachings of an external authority. Her most powerful experience of God comes when she is alone in nature, and she senses that it is God who is the controlling force behind all natural phenomena—the scent of

clover, the bees that fly past her ears, the sun that burns her skin. It is then that she decides for herself that she wants to know more about the will of God, and she wants to follow that will in her own life. She wants to do what God wants her to do.

There is irony in this theme of emerging spirituality. Rebecca, who was feared because she might bring a secular influence into the Orthodox world, is the one who quietly becomes religious, whereas Esty, who likes to give the impression of being very pious, is in fact the one who breaks religious rules. Esty is glib. She regards it as quite all right to sin, if one repents the next day. She is the one who suggests taking the forbidden book home, not Rebecca. Rebecca has a conscience about it. When Esty says no one will know the book is there, Rebecca replies, "But *we'll* know," as if that should be enough to deter them. Esty assures Rebecca that they will not look at the book, but she is the first one who does. It is also Esty who follows her desires and arranges a nocturnal encounter with Dovid that would horrify and alarm her parents if they were to find out. It is ironic that the girl who most insists on following a religious code of conduct is the one who breaks it most flagrantly.

## Emerging Sexuality

The theme of the girls' emerging awareness of sexuality is linked to moral and religious considerations. It is clear from the start that the girls are at an age where they are curious about boys and about sex, although their knowledge of both is slight. They are both drawn to the tall, tanned Dovid Frankel and are fascinated by the book *Essence of Persimmon*, even though their lack of physical maturity ensures that they do not understand much of what it describes. A book about sex is bound up in Esty's mind with sin. She says the book is "*tiuv*, abomination," although this does not stop her from reading it. Rebecca is as intrigued as Esty by the book, but not as shocked by it. It appears that she has not been taught to regard such matters as sinful. Earlier that year, before she went to stay with her relatives, she kissed a boy behind the bleachers and appeared not to experience feelings of guilt. However, her summer at the Adelsteins has changed her in some way. Her feelings after Dovid touches her arm are more complex. As she reflects on it later, she feels a "strange rolling feeling in [her] stomach." This feeling arises in part because she is becoming aware for the first time of what it feels like to have a boy touch her bare arm, but also because she knows that Dovid is doing something against the rules of his religion. Sexual morality and religion are becoming linked in her mind.

In the end, while Esty, without showing any signs of a moral struggle, reads the book and kisses Dovid, Rebecca shows a practical moral wisdom of her own. In letting the forbidden book sink to the bottom of the lake, she is acting according to her developing moral sense and also perhaps according to a feeling that the book has the potential at this stage of her life to cause more trouble than it is worth. Her action in letting the book go is not the result of a decision she has pondered with much thought, however; it seems to happen spontaneously as she plunges into the water.

# Style

## Point of View and Tense

The story is told in the first person by Rebecca. This angle means that all the characters are viewed through Rebecca's eyes and through her thoughts and feelings. There is no independent, objective narrator who could explain, for example, what Esty, or Aunt Malka is thinking. They are revealed only through their words and actions and how Rebecca perceives them. An example of how this focus works occurs when Rebecca asks Esty to explain why she is looking at the forbidden book. Esty "glances down and her eyes widen, as if she's surprised to find she's been holding the book all this time." The reader is not told for certain that Esty is surprised; the qualifying phrase "as if" is necessary to maintain the established point of view, which is that of Rebecca. The point of view helps to put the emphasis on the theme of Rebecca's growth toward a deeper spiritual awareness.

The other noticeable element in the construction of the story is that it is told in the present tense, which means that the action is going on as the narrator speaks rather than having happened in the past which the narrator now is recalling. Present-tense narration is unusual, since much fiction is told in the past tense, although present-tense narration is a technique Orringer uses in a number of her stories. Writers sometimes believe that using the present tense gives a story an immediacy that it might otherwise not have, although what it may gain in immediacy is offset by a lack of perspective. The narrator of a present-tense narrative has no opportunity to look back on the events he or she is describing and assess their significance.

## Setting

The story is set at the time of the Jewish celebration of Shabbos (sometimes written as Shabbat). This timing helps to ground the story in the Jewish faith and provide much of the context in which Rebecca's engagement with her religion takes place. In Jewish tradition, Shabbos, the day on which no work is done, is a reminder of the fact that God rested on the seventh day of creation. It is also a celebration of how God delivered the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. Shabbos begins at sunset on Friday and continues until sunset on Saturday. It is marked with a special dinner on Friday night at which people greet one another with the words "*good Shabbos*." As in the story, Shabbos dinner often incorporates rituals such as candle-lighting and the singing of traditional songs such as "Shalom Aleichem," which means "Peace Be with You" and is a way of giving a blessing. Aunt Malka's baking of challah is also a Shabbos tradition. Challah is braided egg bread which symbolizes the manna, the food God provided the Israelites during their years of wandering in the desert. Traditionally, food served at Shabbos includes, as in the story, gefilte fish (a ball or cake of chopped up fish) and kugel (baked pudding made of potatoes or noodles), and also chicken soup.

# Historical Context

In the story, the Adelsteins appear to be Hasidic Jews. The Hebrew word "hasid" (or "chasid") means "pious." Hasidism is a subdivision of Orthodox Judaism and was founded by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known as Bal Shem Tov (1700-60) in Ukraine. The epithet Bal Shem Tov means "master of the good name." Rabbi Israel wrote no books but promoted the ideal of simple piety by the use of parables and stories told to the uneducated masses. He believed that sincere devotion to God was preferable to scholarly knowledge of the Talmud (the authoritative body of Jewish teachings on civil and religious law, dating from in the early centuries of the Christian era).

Hasidism quickly spread throughout Eastern Europe, and its leaders developed the doctrine of the *zaddik* (the Righteous One), who was believed to be the intermediary between God and man. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810), mentioned as an authority by Uncle Shimon in the story, was the great-grandson of Israel Bal Shem Tov, and was a revered but controversial *zaddik*. He is remembered in the early 2000s for his allegorical folk tales about princes and princesses, beggars and kings, demons and saints, which reveal spiritual truths. Rebbe Nachman saw himself as a messianic figure who would redeem the Jewish people. Some of his followers revered him so much that on his death they refused to acknowledge any successor. This branch of Hasidism is still in existence as of 2005 and is known as the Bratslav Hasidim.

In "The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones," the Adelstein family appears to belong to the branch of Hasidism known as the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. There are strong Lubavitcher communities in Brooklyn, New York (numbering at least fifteen thousand people), and in upstate New York towns such as Kiryas Joel and New Square.

The Chabad-Lubavitch movement was founded in Russia by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745-1812) in the mid-eighteenth century. His son established the sect in Lubavitch, a small town in what subsequently became the independent state of Belarus. In Russian, the word Lubavitch means "city of brotherly love." The word "chabad" is a Hebrew acronym for the three faculties of *chachmah* (wisdom), *binah* (knowledge), and *da'at* (understanding).

The Chabad-Lubavitch movement rapidly spread throughout Russia and the wider Jewish world, becoming especially strong, in modern times, in Israel and the United States. The movement was led by a succession of leaders known as rebbes, each descended from the previous leader. The sixth rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, was living in Poland when World War II broke out. He escaped the Nazis and arrived in New York in 1940. His son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, arrived in New York from Paris the following year, and on the death of his father-in-law in 1950, became the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe. It is this rebbe whose photograph hangs on the wall of Esty and Rebecca's bedroom in the story. Rebecca notices his "long steely beard and his eyes like flecks of black glass." She notices the photograph again when she is about to accompany Esty to meet Dovid ("The dread eyes of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

stare down at me from the wall□). Between the death of Rabbi Schneerson in 1994 and 2005, no other rebbe had been appointed.

The Hasidim are distinctive in their dress. Men wear black coats, white shirts, a black hat, and a long beard with peyos (sidecurls). Sometimes the peyos are worn in front of the ear, or they can be tucked back behind the ear. In the story, Dovid Frankel has prominent peyos, □luxuriously curled, shoulder-length.□ Hasidic women, like Esty and Rebecca in □The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones,□ dress modestly, wearing long skirts with long-sleeved shirts. In some Hasidic groups, married women sometimes shave their heads, and many wear wigs.

Relations between Hasidic men and women are more formal than in mainstream American culture. Hasidic men and women do not shake hands or touch each other in any other way unless they are married, and then only in private.

# Critical Overview

Orringer's collection of stories, *How to Breathe Underwater*, was well received by reviewers. Few singled out □The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones□ for special attention, although the comment of the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* might well apply to Rebecca in that story: □Trapped in awkward, painful situations, the young protagonists of Orringer's debut collection discover surprising reserves of wisdom in themselves.□

Similarly, Lisa Dierbeck's general comment about the collection, in the *New York Times Book Review*, applies to □The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones□: □children and adults operate in a secret world of their own. They seem to exist in an underground, beyond the scope of adults' radar.□ This is certainly true of Rebecca and Esty; their parents have no suspicion of their secret reading of the forbidden book or their nocturnal excursion to meet Dovid.

Dierbeck also points out that □The shadow of mortality hovers over Orringer's book. More than one mother in the collection has battled cancer.□ Rebecca's mother, of course, has lost her infant son, and this has had an impact on Rebecca as well as her mother.

Dierbeck concludes with ringing praise of Orringer's skill as a writer: □The harsh landscape in which Orringer's characters dwell corresponds to the fierce beauty of her writing. Even the grimmest of these stories conveys, along with anguish, a child's spark of mystery and wonder.□

This praise is echoed by other reviewers. In England's *The Guardian*, Emily Perkins offers the opinion that □Orringer allows her girls both self-doubt and great spirit; she gives them generous hearts, word-perfect dialogue and a fictional context that insists on harsh truths but is never bleak.□ In *People Weekly*, Ting Yu comments that Orringer's stories □uncover the dark, electric world of young girls on the cusp of womanhood.□ She adds that □Growing up is hard to do, but under Orringer's masterful care, these young girls□imperfect, broken and searching□find ways to thrive.□

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

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# Critical Essay #1

*Bryan Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on literature. In this essay, he discusses the contrast between Esty and Rebecca and Rebecca's growing spiritual awareness.*

In an interview with Robert Birnbaum, Orringer said of her stories: They tend to be about young women who are in between childhood and adulthood. They are about people who are at a moment of an incredibly difficult transition in their lives. This statement certainly applies to Rebecca in The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones, a story which captures with great immediacy and perceptiveness the world of adolescence in all its turmoil and uncertainty. In one summer away from home, new experiences, new ideas, and new feelings crowd in on the growing girl, and she must quickly develop ways of understanding and integrating them into her awareness of what life is and how she is going to approach it. The other young characters in the story, Esty Adelstein and Dovid Frankel, are also going through similar transitions.

The themes of the story are revealed through the relationship between Rebecca and Esty. Esty is older than Rebecca by a year or so, and initially it is she who appears to take the lead in their relationship. It is Esty who wades first into the lake, unconcerned that her parents do not allow the girls to swim. Esty has a ready-made excuse; if they are challenged on why their clothes are wet, they will tell her parents that they fell in. Deviousness seems to come naturally to Esty; behind her pious exterior she does whatever she wants to do, regardless of whether it breaks the rules. Although the reader only sees Esty through Rebecca's eyes and therefore does not have the same insight into her motivations, Esty does not seem to be conscious of the dichotomy between what she professes and what she actually does. She may have studied her religion with zeal, but she has not yet absorbed in a sincere and mature way the implications it may have for her conduct. It is Esty, for example, who suggests taking the book *Essence of Persimmon* home with them, and it is Esty, despite her assurance to Rebecca that they will not look at it, who is the first to take the book down from the top shelf in the closet and begin reading it.

Esty, however, does have an excuse. She is suffering from that most overwhelming of experiences, first love, a shattering event that has not yet, it appears, happened for Rebecca. It is because Esty is upset with Rebecca over Dovid Frankel that she heads for the closet and reads the forbidden book. Rebecca's sin was to go outside and spend a few moments alone with Dovid, an experience for which Esty apparently longs. Her subsequent jealousy may explain some of her spiteful and manipulative behavior toward Rebecca.

Esty's deviousness does not come so naturally to Rebecca, who is in the process of slowly assimilating what Esty, for all her piety, seems to have missed. Rebecca has been raised in a secular household but in the highly religious environment in which she now finds herself, she gradually develops a quiet awareness of God and some insight into the demands of a life lived in accordance with God's will. Unlike Esty, Rebecca

shows no signs of adopting an excessively pious exterior, but she does indicate that she is developing an ability to listen to her religious feelings and let them guide her in honest but unostentatious way.

Rebecca's religious feelings come from many sources. Sometimes at Shabbos she feels the presence of something larger than herself, and she is also quite affected by Uncle Shimon's story about the flaw in the mezuzah that was responsible□so Uncle Shimon believes□for a house fire. His making this connection sets her thinking about the judgment of God, and the image she forms in her mind of God and religion seems to be a stern one, suggested by the forbidding face of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose piercing eyes stare down at her from the portrait on the bedroom wall. Rebecca even convinces herself that the death of her infant brother is God's punishment of her because she once, for a moment, wished that the baby would die. (Her wish sprang from her awareness that if the baby survived he would need constant care, and she feared as a result she might be neglected by her parents.) Religion as it comes to her in its official form is full of prohibitions, a long list of things one is supposed not to do, especially on Shabbos. There is an especially long list pertaining to when it is and is not permissible to have sex, as Esty informs her with all the confidence of one who knows: □You can't do it outside. You can't do it drunk. You can't do it during the day or with the lights on. You're supposed to think about subjects of Torah while you do it.□

One of her most powerful religious experiences, however, is not mediated, at least not directly, by anything she has read or heard about God and religion. It comes directly from nature and has the stamp of personal experience, not just something someone has told her about what Judaism teaches. It comes when she is alone outside, as Shabbos nears its end. As she lies in the tall grass, experiencing nature through all her senses, she feels a presence gathering around her which culminates in a tremendous moment of new spiritual awareness:

It is God who makes the shadows dissolve around me. He sharpens the scent of clover. He pushes the bees past my ears, directs the sun onto my back until my skin burns through the cotton of my Shabbos dress. I want to know what He wants and do what He wants, and I let my mind fall blank, waiting to be told.

By letting her mind □fall blank□ Rebecca shows that she is ready to learn a more mature understanding of how to discern the will of God. She waits, passively, for God to make his will known to her rather than thinking that all she must do is slavishly follow an external code of law. By making her own individual mind blank, she allows a space for God to step in. The God that speaks directly to the mind and heart in quiet moments is quite different from the deity who harshly judges those who make one small mistake.

However, in spite of this moment of revelation, Rebecca is not yet able to free herself of the shadow of guilt and judgment, since later that night she reproaches herself, and everyone else, for not being more mindful of the demands of God as they go about their day-to-day lives.

Toward the end of the story, Rebecca's emerging religious awareness bears fruit. As Esty prepares for her reckless encounter with Dovid at night, the relationship between the cousins has been quietly reversed from what it was at the beginning. Now Rebecca, the younger of the two, is the one for whom the dictates of religion influence her attitude and conduct. Rebecca also feels a sense of responsibility to protect her cousin, even though, being so young, she is not sure what she is protecting her from.

Esty in this situation certainly needs some help. She is so much in the grip of her infatuation with Dovid that she will do whatever she feels she must in order to get what she wants. By insisting that if she and Rebecca are caught, Rebecca must take all the blame, she shows her immaturity, her failure to accept that she is responsible for her own actions. It must be said also that Rebecca is not above using unscrupulous tactics of her own, as when Esty is writing a note to Dovid, and Rebecca says she will scream for Esty's mother unless Esty tells her what she is doing.

When Esty does meet up with Dovid, she is quite brazen in her attempt to manipulate him. Faced with this aggressive and cunning girl, the previously self-assured Dovid, the same boy who confidently touched Rebecca's arm the previous evening, does not have a clue how to behave. “What do you want me to do?” he says feebly. “What am I supposed to do?” As Esty reaches up to him and kisses him, Rebecca goes about some action of her own. On their way to meet Dovid, she has been acutely aware of the moral and religious implications of what they are about to do; even the natural environment reminds her of it: “Tree frogs call in the dark, the rubber-band twang of their throats sounding to me like *God, God, God*.” Rebecca seems to have a quiet awareness that the book *Essence of Persimmon* has brought them nothing but quarrels and danger. They are too young, not ready for such a book, and she knows it. As she wades into the water and floats on her back, gazing up at the Milky Way, the water acts like a mikvah for her—the ritual bath of purification that Aunt Malka explained to her; it is spiritually cleansing, and she has no difficulty in letting go of the fascinating but forbidden book. She has chosen the sensible, moral choice, but done it quietly, with no great fanfare of piety.

And yet, even while Rebecca takes a mature action of which her religious, conservative relatives would approve, there is another element in this scene that suggests Rebecca is also cultivating an independent spirit and is not bound solely by the prescriptions of her religion. At the beginning of the story she pointed out that she and Esty were forbidden to swim because, they were told, it was immodest to show their bodies. Instead, they had waded fully clothed into the lake. But this time Rebecca does not hesitate to remove her shirt and skirt, and she notes how she feels the night air against her bare skin. Equivalent of a mikvah this may be, but it is one that is closely connected to the natural world in all its sensuality. The nearly naked young girl who floats serenely on the water at night is a very different person from the one who returned home with the Shabbos groceries only a few days earlier. Quietly doing what she feels is the right thing (as Aunt Malka told Esty that she must), she also shows she is growing in independence, calmly ignoring a rule for which she sees no justification.

**Source:** Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on □The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

# Topics for Further Study

Based on the story, do you have a negative or a positive impression of the type of Judaism it presents? Is the author, who is herself Jewish, supportive or critical of Judaism and the way it is interpreted by the Hasids? Write a short essay in which you respond to these questions, citing passages or incidents in the story to support your argument.

Consider Aunt Malka's statement to Rebecca, □You have to do what you think is right . . . even when the people around you are doing otherwise.□ How do Rebecca and Esty interpret her words? When private morality conflicts with the dictates of religion, which voice should one follow? Write an essay discussing this issue, giving examples of situations in which this conflict might occur and how one might respond in dealing with them.

What type of sex education should be taught in public schools? Should abstinence be emphasized or should the emphasis be on teaching students to make responsible decisions? Should students be informed about homosexuality? At what age? Should teens be allowed to obtain birth control pills from family planning clinics and doctors without permission from a parent? Prepare a class presentation in which you discuss these issues.

Write a short story in which the main character experiences his or her first crush or first love and behaves in a reckless way in response to it. Try to capture the way it feels to have these feelings, and also indicate ways in which the person is changed by his or her experience. What does the character learn through falling in love?

# What Do I Read Next?

Renowned Canadian writer Alice Munro is one of Orringer's favorite writers. Orringer singled out Munro's short story collection, *The Love of a Good Woman* (1999) for particular praise, admiring the stories "The Children Stay," "Before the Change," and "My Mother's Dream," as well as the title story. Orringer admires the way Munro describes the inner lives of her characters.

In an interview available on the Barnes and Noble website, Orringer named George Saunders's *Pastoralia* (2001) as one of her favorite books. It is Saunders's second collection, consisting of five stories as well as the title novella. Saunders sets his stories in a disturbing near future in which capitalism and the free market rule the world, resulting in grotesque inequities. The stories feature many wretched characters in appallingly bad situations, but there are many moments of grace and humor, and in spite of the squalor, the human spirit seems to triumph. Orringer commented that the stories always hit the right emotional notes.

Sue Fishkoff's *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* (2003) explores how young Lubavitchers carry their message of spiritual renewal to the wider Jewish world throughout the United States. Fishkoff, who admires and respects the Lubavitch movement, draws on many interviews she conducted, as well as her experiences in traveling with Lubavitchers to Shabbos dinners, mikvah demonstrations, and fundraising events.

*The Chosen* (1967), by Chaim Potok, is a coming-of-age story that focuses on the friendship between two Jewish boys in Brooklyn, New York, in the 1940s. Reuven is from an Orthodox Jewish family. Danny is a member of a Hasidic sect, and his father is a respected rebbe and *zaddik*. The unlikely friendship between the boys grows against a background of World War II, Zionism, and the founding of the state of Israel.

In Alice McDermott's *Child of My Heart* (2002), Theresa, a middle-aged woman, looks back on a summer spent working among the rich residents of East Hampton, on Long Island, New York, in the 1960s, when she was fifteen. Theresa also has to look after her visiting eight-year-old cousin. Together they weave a fantasy world, which for Theresa includes emerging sexual awareness.

# Further Study

Isaacs, Ron, *Ask the Rabbi: The Who, What, When, Where, Why, & How of Being Jewish*, John Wiley & Sons, 2003.

Rabbi Ron Isaacs's book is an informative guide to all matters Jewish, aimed at teenage readers. It includes answers to serious questions about the nature of God, prayer, and death, and responds to more light-hearted questions, such as why there are so many Jewish comedians and doctors. It includes sections on "classic Jewish books," including the Talmud and the Kabbalist text, the Zohar. The author is a rabbi of a New Jersey congregation and co-director of its Hebrew high school.

Levine, Stephanie Wellen, *Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey among Hasidic Girls*, New York University Press, 2004.

Stephanie Wellen Levine spent a year living as a participant observer in the Lubavitcher Hasidic community in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York. Her book answers the question of whether adolescent girls raised in a religious environment such as Hasidism are able to develop an individual voice of their own or whether they are restricted to conformist, submissive roles. Levine found that the girls displayed a rich individuality within the confines of a patriarchal world. The book tells the story, through interviews, of seven Lubavitch girls.

Morris, Bonnie J., *Lubavitcher Women in America: Identity and Activism in the Postwar Era*, State University of New York Press, 1998.

This is a study of Hasidic women in the Lubavitcher sect. The emphasis is on the contribution made by women to their community since 1950, when outreach programs supported by the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem M. Schneerson began to empower Lubavitcher women.

Review of *How to Breathe Underwater*, in *Kirkus Reviews*, Vol. 71, No 15, August 1, 2003, p. 986.

The reviewer offers cautious praise of Orringer's collection, but suggests that too many of the stories show little narrative progression and tend to peter out.

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale’s“For Students” Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on “classic” novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of “classic” novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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