Snow in August Short Guide

Snow in August by Pete Hamill

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Characters

Michael Devlin, with his innocence, courage, resourcefulness, and pristine intelligence, is the young knight of this initiation rite. Because of his good heart and his purity, he is able to raise the Golem from the mud, something that rabbi Hirsch himself was unable to do when the Nazis came to Prague. There is a kind of a Celtic aura to this Galahad figure, whose purity comes both from faith and from charity—love, not only of God, but of his fellow humans, as the rabbi says at the end of the novel. Because of these qualities he brings about not only justice—the punishment of Frankie and the Falcons—but also healing, when Michael and his mythical alterego, the Golem, restore even Rabbi Hirsch's broken teeth. However, Michael is no goody-two-shoes model boy, as he struggles with his own fears, especially his fear of humiliation, and with his own emerging sexuality. Even his faith is not simple: "But when Rabbi Hirsch spoke of his doubting youth, Michael felt even closer to him, for Michael had his own unspoken doubts, his own questions."

The retribution he takes on Frankie is itself grim enough to keep firmly in the real world, and Michael's growing perception of the tenacity and prevalence of evil precludes the sentimental.

Rabbi Judah Hirsch's experiences in occupied Europe and then as a refugee has made him hopeless, even bitter at times. Although he is a rabbi, Hirsch has lost confidence in the power of goodness over evil, a faith Michael restores when he brings the Golem: "Good exists," he [the rabbi] whispered, . . . not just sin."

As Michael and the rabbi exchange words, language, and stories, their lives become entwined. As Michael grows older, the rabbi grows younger in their shared passion for Prague, music, and baseball. He and Michael are alike in their intellectual curiosity, their joy in life, and their ability to reach out to others. As Michael's two friends, Jimmy and Sonny, recede from his life, Rabbi Hirsch enters to fill the void with a world beyond the neighborhood. Even Sonny and Jimmy, however, are part of an essentially good vision of humanity embodied in the little world of multiethnic Brooklyn, as they return to Michael's side when he is seriously threatened.

Michael's relationship with his mother, Kate, is one of the most endearing parts of the book, a positive image of a mother-son relationship and a single-parent family. The bond between mother and son is very strong as they work together to care for the apartment building they live in, and support one another after the death of Michael's father at the Battle of the Bulge. Michael's own strength comes from the positive memory he has of this father, and from Kate herself, as she passes on to her son not only her own strong sense of self and ability to survive and protect her young, but also her willingness to let Michael venture into the unknown, to form bonds with others beyond her ken without losing her centering influence. Although bound by her own background to the ethic of the slum, the "no ratting" code by which the poor protect themselves from the institutions which govern their lives, she gives Michael permission

and encouragement to go beyond the life she has created for them from grit and determination.

Social Concerns

Pete Hamill's concern in Snow in August, his 1997 account of Michael Devlin's boyhood passage in 1947 Brooklyn, is how to retain one's sense of honor and identity while connecting with a wider world and a more comprehensive moral code. The young Michael, whose father Tommy died at the Battle of the Bulge, struggles to help his mother, Kate, create a happier life for them and to overcome the limitations, both moral and material, of his Brooklyn neighborhood.

He achieves his goals through the examples set by his brave, feisty mother, and with the help of his parish priest, Father Heaney, whose experience as a chaplain in Europe has given him a wider sense of human tragedy and compassion. Rabbi Judah Hirsch, who introduces the boy not only to a more transcendent moral code and ethic of compassion, but also to a wider world of language, literature, and life. In a neighborhood where Michael observes that virtually no one ever graduates from high school, he develops a thirst for learning (and for good grades) that promises to propel him beyond the world of the steelyard and the docks.

The idea of creating a wider community, breaking the barriers of racial, ethnic, and religious division, is always of interest to Hamill. Michael and his two friends, Jimmy Kabinsky and Sonny Mantamarano, are a microcosm of multiethnic immigrant Brooklyn. Their secure childhood world is disturbed when they become unwilling witnesses of a candy store robbery attempt in which the old Jewish owner, Mr. G., is beaten nearly to death with the cash register. Because of the neighborhood ethic of honor, in which no one ever "rats out" anyone to the cops, Michael and his friends spend the next months in fear, wondering if Frankie and his gang, the Falcons, suspect them. Meanwhile the great divisions of the war in Europe come home as well, when Rabbi Hirsch's synagogue, and later Michael's apartment, is defaced with swastikas. Even the trip to Ebbets Field to see Jackie Robinson play baseball is marred with conflict when toughs in the grandstand boo Robinson and heckle Hirsch. Gradually, the more honorable elements in the community, such as Father Heaney and other veterans who help wash off the swastikas and the union men in the stands who beat up the hecklers, lose ground, until Kate is attacked, and both Michael and Rabbi Hirsch are put in the hospital by beatings.

The growing darkness is lifted when Michael and the Rabbi escape to Ebbets Field, where the great Jackie Robinson is opening sports to African Americans by bringing them into Major League baseball, the center of American culture.

When Michael becomes Rabbi Hirsch's "Shabbos goy," doing the Saturday chores when Jews are not permitted to work, and tutors the Rabbi in English, in exchange for Yiddish lessons, he enters into a world of mystery and learning symbolized by old Prague, with its music, culture, and the mystery and magic of the Kabbalah, with which sixteenth-century Jewry protected itself from the oppression of its day.

The rabbi's Jewish wisdom adds a dimension to Michael's Baltimore catechism Catholicism, and his tragic view of life opens a door on the potential of the human spirit. When Michael learns the mystical incantations necessary to raise a Golem, the legendary earth-man who is the Captain Marvel of the rabbi's tales, he and the wonder dog Sticky, from his father's tales, are able to defeat Frankie and his gang in an epic encounter in the poolroom just as Frankie is making ready to consolidate his hold on the neighborhood and eliminate the rabbi, Michael, and his mother for good.

Techniques

Hamill's most basic paradigm is the intertwining of a journalistic realism, the mean streets of Brooklyn and its denizens, and the magical and mystical realms of Prague and the Kabbalah. The image of snow unites the two worlds—the snowy street where the old wino is found frozen between two cars, and the miraculous "snow in August" created for the showdown in the poolroom. With its ability both to cleanse and destroy, the miraculous snow becomes a metaphor for transformation and a time in which potential is hidden, waiting. The novel begins in a three-day blizzard, through which Michael trudges to serve early morning Mass: "He could remember six of his eleven winters on the earth, and there had never been snow like this. This was snow out of the movies about the Yukon that he watched in the Venus.

This was like the great Arctic blizzards in the stories of Jack London that he read in the library on Garibaldi Street." Michael thinks of his father dead in the snows of Belgium, and of the old man who froze in the street. The novel ends in hot August, when Michael and the Golem go to confront Frankie and the Falcons in a magical snowstorm: "Millions of flakes, radiant and beautiful, drifting down through the August night ... In the churning, gyrating, eddying frenzy of the sudden storm, nobody saw the white boy and his giant black companion."

The motif of a young knight's initiation is the guiding myth of the novel—an evil foe, a period of trial and isolation, a final test, and a treasure. When he asks about the rumored treasure hidden in the synagogue, Michael points to his head, where his new knowledge is stored. Other mythic traditions enhance the coming together of the two separate worlds, Michael's, and that of Rabbi Hirsch. On one side are the Irish heroes, from the sagas and the uprising alike, the American heroes in the books Michael reads, both London and the comics, and on the other are the magicians of old Prague—the Golem, and the villain, "bald as Dr. Sivana in Captain Marvel or Lex Luthor in Superman." In his imagination, "Michael was suddenly huddled in a doorway, as a mob marched on the Jewish Quarter, hurling stones at old men and young ladies, smashing windows, waving sharped poles called pikes. Up the street, Brother Thaddeus smiled from a balcony. Then —Shazam!—the stones were changed in midflight into roses. Big, fat, white roses!

Their petals dropping away like snowflakes!" The one mythical system which unites boy and rabbi, however, is not Irish or Jewish but American— baseball, and the towering figure of Jackie Robinson. As Michael follows the ordeal of Robinson's entrance into the major leagues he sees himself in that isolated, somehow tragic figure, who comes in the guise of the Golem (who wears an I'M FOR JACKIE button on his cape) at the end: "Sitting there, the Golem was as dark as Jackie Robinson, his hazel eyes full of sorrow;" the Golem a symbol for all those who struggled for a place in the new land.

Themes

The moral education of a young man and his initiation into the world of adult tasks are the themes of this bildungsroman.

Still on crutches from his beating, and deserted by his two friends, Sonny and Jimmy, Michael emerges from a period of introspective isolation to take dramatic action. He begins to question the street ethic that kept him from moving against the Falcons earlier, the ethic to which his mother herself ascribes, never to be a squealer: "I should have told them everything ... I learned, sometimes you keep your mouth shut about a crime, that's worse than the crime." His own personal odyssey and Jackie Robinson's ordeal teach a lesson about intolerance, violence, and hypocrisy, epitomized in the baseball's commissioner's handling of Robinson and Leo Durocher, his manager, that make the exploits of captain Marvel seem childish. Michael must become his own hero, adopting a new role model in Robinson, and a mentor in the rabbi.

Through the teachings of Rabbi Hirsch, he learns the value of the culture, the past, a shared history (the Irish and the Jews), and of life's tragic dimensions in the story of the death of Hirsch's wife, the Zionist activist Leah, in the fall of Prague. Michael's passage to manhood involves not only courage and endurance, but also the ability to transcend one's own concerns and empathize with others.

Hope is regained by creating a bond between formerly separate cultures, Michael's world and that of the rabbi, and in the promise of transcending divisions through art, language, and literature.

Moral education is matched by intellectual growth. The idea of the Word is very powerful, "they were like those secret codes used by spies," not only Captain Marvel's "Shazam!" but also in the Latin of the Mass, where bread and wine are transformed with words, and even more in the Hebrew of the rabbi's books, the Yiddish he exchanges for English (and uses to get a good deal on a suit in the garment district), and the sacred, hidden words of power in the Kabbalah, used to create the Golem. The magical aura of words and their power to unlock the unknown provides enlightenment, charm, and a joyful quality to a life that would otherwise seem grim. Michael's favorite authors—Jack London and Robert Louis Stevenson—take him to distant lands, and his father's tales of the Irish heroes, CuChulainn and Finn MacCool, provide a model of power and heroism so necessary for a litde boy who often feels powerless and alone. Even comic books provide a glimpse of a wider world. Michael's beloved baseball itself is more a creation of words than a physical action, coming alive for him in the radio voice of announcer Red Barber, with the rhubarb and the catbird seat, which Michael explains so carefully to the rabbi. The entire kingdom of old Prague, a magical land of heroes, villains, and spirits—Judah Loew, Brother Thaddeus, and the mad Emperor Rudolf—comes alive through the rabbi's stories.

As Michael and the rabbi exchange languages and knowledge, they create a visionary Americanism out of an immigrant past. The struggle of the outsider to become part of a

new culture, symbolized in the novel by Jackie Robinson's historic entrance into the major leagues, transforms both the individual and the culture itself. Looking at his bruised face in the mirror, he feels he has become Jackie Robinson: "They made me into him. Into Jackie Robinson." The new world that Michael and the Rabbi encounter in Ebbets Field is made up of emigres from all races and parts of the globe, united by a common experience—here, baseball and World War II. Even the language of Brooklyn is an expression of the mixing of these different cultures. "This is history," says Michael to his mother, as his scrapbooks of Jackie Robinson's clippings grows bigger. The final scene is a vision of the restored human community gathered in Rabbi Hirsch's small sanctuary, Mr. G. And Leah restored along with the other murdered Jews in a Brooklyn filled with the spirits of bygone Prague: "For now Michael stood quietly in the hot Brooklyn night while cloud tried to become angels and bird talked and stones became roses and white horses galloped over rooftops, and the rabbi danced with his wife."

Key Questions

Snow in August is a rich work suitable for many audiences. It would be especially useful with a young adult audience, even with junior high students. Its historical setting furnishes opportunity for investigation into 1940s America and life after the war, baseball, race relations, and a host of other topics. Readers interested in immigrant history and family roots will find the novel rewarding as well.

1. Michael's mother and father, Kate and Tommy Devlin, are clearly a major influence on his life. What do they teach him, and what is the image of family life in the novel?

2. Michael's slum surroundings would seem to offer a very limited view of the world and the future. How does Michael reach beyond his environment for a wider view of the world?

3. How does religion influence Michael—both his own Catholicism, and the Jewish tradition he learns from Rabbi Hirsch?

4. What is the image of World War II America, Nazism, the American ideal versus a culture of intolerance towards other races and creeds?

5. Michael's chief passion is baseball.

What does this sport and its history teach him? What does he teach Rabbi Hirsch?

How does Jackie Robinson fit in?

6. What is similar in Michael's background and that Rabbi Hirsch teaches him? How does the novel combine both traditions?

7. What role does the love of words and language play in the novel? How does Hamill's use of Yiddish words, baseball terms, and others contribute to this effect?

8. What does the Golem really represent for Michael? How is this magical ending appropriate in such a realistic novel?

9. Education is a major theme of the novel. What role does it play for Michael?

How does literacy, the newspaper, and his school fit in?

10. What lessons for present-day divisions within communities and between people can be learned from Snow in August?

Literary Precedents

Hamill's blend of journalistic and magical realism brings together several rich strands of American literature into a bildungsroman which illuminates the naturalistic landscape of post War Brooklyn with the magic of the American hero myth and Jewish mysticism together. The story of the poor boy who becomes a hero is part of our national myth, especially in the immigrant tradition. Ragged Dick comes to mind, as does the realist tradition of the novels of Henry Roth, James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren, and more recently, E. L. Doctorow (see separate entries). Jackie Robinson himself is somewhat of a boyhood icon around whom a tradition of juvenile literature has evolved. Hamill himself credits his readings in the Yiddish tradition, including folks tales and proverbs, and Jewish mysticism, learned in his visits to Prague and from Chaim Bloch's The Golem and Angela Maria Ripellino Magic Prague.

Related Titles

Although Hamill is careful to note that Snow in August is entirely fictional, the setting, both place and time, is very much like that of his own boyhood, recounted in A Drinking Life (1994). A somewhat older Michael Devlin is also the hero of Loving Women (1989; see separate entry), and their backgrounds are clearly similar, although some details are different—the first Michael Devlin has siblings, a father yet alive and very different from the expressive, heroic Tommy Devlin, and a mother from the Bronx, and not Irish Kate.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994