

# Torn Thread Short Guide

## Torn Thread by Anne Isaacs

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">Torn Thread Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles/Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>

## Overview

Torn Thread is a fictional memoir based on the experiences of Eva Buchbinder, the mother-in-law of the author Anne Isaacs.

The story is set in a Nazi labor camp during World War II. After her older sister Rachel is taken by the Nazis and transported to a labor camp, Eva's father arranges for her to also be transported to the same camp so that she can look after her sister and so that, no matter what happens to the rest of the family, they will be together. Because he works as an accountant for the Germans, he has learned that Jews are being sent to concentration camps to be exterminated, and he hopes that he will be able to save his daughters by insuring their place in a slave labor camp. Eva finds Rachel at the Parschnitz camp, and together they survive backbreaking work in the textile factory, starvation, filth, illness, and degradation by the Nazi guards. Isaacs tells a fascinating and realistic story filled with details of the everyday struggles, boredom, and horror faced by Jews in the camps. Because this story takes place in a labor camp rather than in a death camp like Auschwitz, it introduces readers to the horrific nature of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust without dwelling on the apparatuses of death, like the gas chambers. Instead, it focuses on the struggles faced by individuals as they fought to survive. It also explores such universal themes as the importance of free will and choice, the interrelatedness of people, and individual responsibility.

## About the Author

Anne Isaacs, born March 2, 1949, grew up in Buffalo, New York, and lived there until she left to attend the University of Michigan where she studied literature.

As a child, she read widely and voraciously, sampling books from her parents' collection and the public library. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* made a particularly strong impression on her as she read and re-read it many times. She also read many adult classics, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Lorna Doone*, and *The Caine Mutiny*, but she did not read much children's literature until she began reading to her own children. She claims that this late introduction to the world of children's literature allowed her to avoid making distinctions between stories for children and those for adults and to apply the same standards to both. She does not simplify her writing for children because she is confident that children can stretch and grow to read and appreciate good writing.

Although she published a few poems at the age of ten in a city-wide magazine of writing for school children, she did not seriously pursue creative writing until 1989, when her daughter came home from school rebelling against the boring "Pioneer Days" activities at her school. Her research into the activities of girls on the frontier, which was inspired by the need for some better stories for her daughter, led to her awardwinning picture book, *Swamp Angel*, the story of Angelica Longrider, whose amazing accomplishments rival those of Paul Bunyan. Illustrated by Paul A. Zelinsky, *Swamp Angel* was a Caldecott Honor Book and an American Library Association Notable Book selection in 1994.

After *Swamp Angel*, Isaacs turned toward a far more serious subject in *Torn Thread*, a novel based on the World War II story of her mother-in-law Eva Buchbinder Torn Thread 405 Koplwicz. As she worked on this book, Isaacs often thought that she may have been destined to tell her mother-in-law's story, and by doing so reclaim her own lost family and increase understanding of European Jewry. Although this was a painful novel to write, Isaacs feels that it is important for her own and other children to hear the stories of their past so that they know where they came from.



# Setting

In *Torn Thread*, Isaacs creates a historical, cultural, and physical setting in order to tell her story. The story takes place in Bedniz, Poland, and Parschnitz, Czechoslovakia, between June 1943 and May 1945. As the story opens, the Jews of Bedniz have been rounded up and confined to the ghetto where they live in constant terror of being "selected" and sent east to the Nazi death camps. They live in deplorable conditions with little food and water, no jobs, and no schools, but the Buchbinder family has been able to stay together. Rachel, who is timid, sickly, and weak, is arrested by the SS and sent to Parschnitz. The Parschnitz labor camp, where Eva's father arranges to send her so that she can protect her sister, provides young girls as slave laborers to nearby factories that manufacture textiles in support of the war effort.

As soon as Eva leaves Bedniz on the transport train, she begins to experience even more horrific consequences of the Nazi regime than she had lived with in the ghetto.

The Nazi guards are loud and disrespectful; the train car is crammed full of hot, tired, hungry, smelly people; and the level of tension and terror is excruciating. When she arrives at the camp, Eva must quickly learn how things work, and she is ably assisted by her sister Rachel and the other girls in her barracks. She learns where to hide her belongings, how to pass inspection by the guards, how to operate a flax-spinning machine without getting injured, and how to survive in the camp.

In addition to the historical setting of World War II and the Holocaust, Isaacs also uses many details of Jewish life to provide a cultural context for the strength of friendship and family devotion that sustain Eva and her sister. From the very beginning of the story, Eva and her father recognize the importance of the survival of their family and worry about who will tend her mother's grave if they all perish. Her father sends her off with a book of prayers and Psalms to sustain her faith in difficult times. Yom Kippur, an important Jewish holiday, is a focal point for Eva and the other girls as they struggle with honoring their faith in the face of trying to survive. Herr Schmidt gains their trust and proves his humanity to them by studying Torah with some of the girls at the lunch break and by arranging for a day of cleaning the textile machines on Yom Kippur so that the girls may observe this important Jewish holiday, the day of atonement. Eva also must struggle with remaining true to Jewish dietary laws in the face of starvation when the stew provided as a reward for extra work turns out to be made of pork. All these details of Jewish culture and observance reinforce the humanity of the Jewish characters and intensify the reader's reaction to their fate.

Finally, Isaacs provides details of the physical setting of the story that contribute to its realism. For the most part, Eva and her friends live in very unpleasant surroundings, and these surroundings become increasingly unpleasant as the war drags on.

The barracks are cramped, dirty, and frequently cold; the factory and the train that takes them there everyday are hot, dusty, and noisy. There is never enough food, and the girls spend an incredible amount of time being thirsty and hungry and searching and



bartering for food. The weather, whether it is hot or cold, snowing or raining, windy or calm, plays a large part in the lives of the inmates of Parschnitz, which contributes to the realism of the story but which also symbolizes the forces that buffet these characters without mercy.



## Social Sensitivity

The study of the Holocaust is a socially sensitive issue in and of itself. This period of history is so inhumane and horrific that some may find it difficult to hear about and discuss. Some of the details of the story in this novel will likely be upsetting to some readers, including the difficult living conditions, the vivid descriptions of illness, accidents, and deprivation, and the killing of prisoners by the Nazi guards. Unfortunately, these conditions and events are historical facts that must be recorded and remembered, and stories of real people are among the most effective methods for accomplishing this task. In addition to passing on the story of the Holocaust to future generations, this story can also be used to stimulate discussion of subsequent times of prejudice, racial persecution, and genocide.



# Literary Qualities

Throughout *Torn Thread*, Isaacs employs figurative language—similes and metaphors and symbols—to express moods, develop characters, and explore themes. Isaacs uses similes and metaphors to describe the weather and the natural surroundings of Eva's world and to convey her emotions. When she learns that her father has probably died, Eva finds expression for her sadness in a sunset where "the clouds were streaked with crimson, as if the heavens were bleeding." In the camp's darkest hours, storm clouds "wheel drunkenly across the sky" and stars which have provided them with hope now appear to be no more than "fragments of broken glass." When she is liberated from the camp and takes a walk into the woods, she finds wildflowers clustered like bridal bouquets and meadows that fall away before her like a rolling ocean. This enchanting scene fills her with joy that is in such contrast to the world she has been living in that she weeps aloud and asks, "How could life be so beautiful and cruel, both at once? What kind of world has God created?"

The two symbols used repeatedly in *Torn Thread* are thread, which represents the tangled and interwoven fate of the Jewish people living under the Nazi regime, and stars, which represent hope, beauty, and the presence of God in the world. From the beginning of the story, Eva uses thread as a way to stay connected to her family. She knits sweaters to keep Rachel warm, untangling yarn from old sweaters to make new ones.

In the camp, she knits and sells scarves and gloves for the other prisoners as a means of survival. In the factory, she spins flax thread.

When she notices a torn thread on the machine and her own hair becomes tangled in it, she has her accident. Eva believes that as long as she can keep her threads together she will survive.

Stars and the night sky appear as important symbols throughout the story. The opening line of the novel is "Night was coming."

This line foreshadows the darkness of the events that follow. The night before Eva leaves for Parschnitz, she and her father contemplate the constellations and observe that the stars seem to have pulled back from the sky as if they are abandoning the Jews.

When she realizes that her father is probably dead, the sky is too dark to see the stars. At the end of the day of Yom Kippur, she has renewed her faith in God and herself, and she is able to see the first evening stars, which are a sign, the day of atonement and fasting is over. At the same time, these stars symbolize Eva's renewed determination to survive even though she knows her father is dead. As they wait for the Soviet army to end the war, the only lights available to them at night are the faint lights of the few stars that they can see. When Rachel comes out of her fever at the end of the



story, the stars that link them to their father and to hope for their future come out one by one in the night sky.



# Themes and Characters

Through a large cast of interesting, sympathetic characters and universal themes that convey important truths for all readers, *Torn Thread* touches on many of the central facts and issues of the Holocaust and engages readers in learning and caring about this important historical period. Isaacs based the novel on the experiences of her mother-in-law, Eva Buchbinder, and Eva's sister Rachel in a slave labor camp in Parschnitz, Czechoslovakia from 1943 to 1945. By telling this story through engaging characters, Isaacs not only records the story of her family, she also recreates the painful experiences of the Holocaust for young adult readers in a way that they can understand and appreciate.

Eva Buchbinder is the central character in *Torn Thread*, and she grows and matures throughout the novel. As the story begins, she learns that even though she is only twelve years old, she must leave her father and travel by herself to the Parschnitz labor camp where the Nazis have taken her older sister. Her father tells her that she must help Rachel to survive, not through heroic acts, but by making small choices that will keep them alive one more hour at a time until they have finally survived the war.

After arriving at the labor camp, Eva learns the rules and ways of this new environment to protect herself and Rachel, and is able to use her various skills and strengths as a candy maker and a knitter to get extra rations and special favors. When Rachel is too ill to work, Eva nurses her back to health and protects her from the guards.

When Eva learns that her father and the other residents of Bedniz have been sent to the death camps and killed, she withholds this information from Rachel because she knows that Rachel needs the goal of seeing her family again to keep going.

*Torn Thread* 407 Eva and Rachel's relationship grows and changes throughout the course of the war.

When Eva arrives at Parschnitz, she feels totally responsible for Rachel, and Rachel seems to expect and accept this even though she is the older sister. When Eva is injured in an accident with the flax-spinning machine, Rachel must care for her, and their relationship begins to change.

The other Jewish girls in the story provide a contrast to Eva and Rachel, in that they make different choices and suffer different consequences. Through these characters, the reader can see what might have happened to Eva and Rachel if they had not made the choices that they did. Dora and Rosie have a relationship similar to that of Eva and Rachel; Dora takes care of and protects Rosie. However, when Rosie does not survive, Dora is filled with guilt. As Eva reassures Dora that it is not her fault that Rosie died, she realizes that no one can be completely responsible for the fate of another. Hannah understands how to survive in the factory, for she teaches Eva what she must do to survive and pushes her to keep going no matter what. Kayla, on the other hand, chooses to act totally alone and supports the Resistance by sabotaging the cloth being



made for uniforms. Throughout the story, she challenges Eva's decision to stay with Rachel rather than resist the Nazis, and eventually, when Kayla escapes from the factory, Eva reaffirms that her responsibility to help Rachel to survive is more important. Bella, the girl who collaborates with the guards, represents another set of survival choices. Although Eva makes candy for the head guard, she does not betray her fellow prisoners, and she realizes that she is different from Bella too.

The non-Jewish characters in the story provide a different context for Eva and Rachel's choices. In some ways, they too are powerless against their environment, but each day they also have the opportunity to make choices that help them and others to survive one more hour, one more day.

Katrina provides Eva with a limited amount of help, but is not willing to risk much for her. Herr Schmidt, on the other hand, is able to use his position in the factory to help all the girls survive. He is a religious man who studies Torah with the rabbi's daughters, and he declares a cleaning day at the factory on Yom Kippur so that the girls may observe this important holiday. He brings the girls news of the war and covers for them when problems occur in the factory.

Although Frau Hawlick seems like a typical cruel Nazi, she is also able to make some choices that help the girls survive. Because Eva makes candy for her, she makes sure that Eva is not "selected" for the death camps even when she is injured.

The important themes in *Torn Thread* all concern matters of choice and responsibility. When Eva leaves her father, he tells her, "Even now, there is sometimes a choice, a chance to act. Each choice may not mean much. It may only grant you another hour.

But that is one hour closer to the time when we can be together. Whenever you can, ask yourself which choice might keep you and Rachel alive for one more hour." At the same time he makes her promise that she will not give up. He urges her to trust in God because he believes that "either we will find a path around or God will teach us to fly." Throughout the story, Eva wrestles with the question of whether she is responsible for her and Rachel's fate or whether outside powers, such as the Nazis and God, control it. Eva and the other characters also struggle with retaining their inner freedom while being slaves. When she begins working at the factory, Hannah tells her, "I know what you're thinking, that they can't take your pride, or your faith, or any of what's inside you. I used to tell myself that when I first got here. Then one morning—after you've been here for a year or two, you'll see—you'll wake up and realize all of that's gone." All three themes, making choices, personal responsibility, and maintaining personal integrity, are important in most novels written for young adults, but the context of the Holocaust places them in stark relief and leads to interesting and important moral speculation and debate.



## Topics for Discussion

1. When Eva reflects on her character as she says her Yom Kippur prayers, she describes herself as stubborn, proud, hardworking, and brave. How well do these qualities describe Eva's character? What character traits did she leave out?

2. When Eva hears that everyone from the Bedniz ghetto was sent to Auschwitz and killed, she decides not to tell Rachel.

Was this fair to Rachel, or should she have told her?

3. How does Isaacs use weather to create the setting and convey the mood of the story?

4. Kayla, Eva, and Uncle Nuchem manage to make humorous comments in the midst of dreadful circumstances.

What do their humorous comments add to the story?

5. Eva and Rachel are separated and reunited three times during the story. What do we learn about the sisters' relationship from each of these reunion scenes?

6. When Eva arrives at the factory, Hannah tells her that the Nazis will take away her pride, her faith, and her inner spirit of freedom. Does Eva lose her inner freedom? What about the other characters: Rachel, Herr Schmidt, Kayla, Katrina, the camp doctor?

7. The loose hair she leaves out of her scarf causes Eva's accident in the factory. Why does she put herself in such jeopardy when she is so careful to protect Rachel and herself from other dangers?

8. Isaacs uses many similes and metaphors throughout the novel. Find examples of her use of figurative language and explain how they are used to tell the story.

9. Why does Herr Schmidt help the Jewish girls in the factory? What makes him different from the other Nazi characters in the story?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Create a map of the part of Eastern Europe where the story took place. Label the places mentioned in the story as well as the names that are used for the same locations today.
2. Frau Hawlik orders Eva to write a letter to her father requesting blankets. Write a letter from Eva to Papa after her arrival at the camp.
3. Write a true account of a time when you were responsible for keeping someone or something safe. Describe what you did to fulfill your responsibility and how the experience made you feel.
4. Choose an incident in the novel and write a journal entry describing it from the point of view of one of the characters.
5. Kayla Rubenstein is working with the Resistance to sabotage the fabric used to make uniforms for German soldiers.

Find out more about the Resistance and its fighters during World War II and the impact they had on the war.

6. Interview an older member of your family or someone you may know who was alive during the time of this story, 1943-1945. Where did they live? What was their life like? What impact did World War II have on them and their family?
7. Over six million Jews died during the Holocaust, many of them in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Research the history of Auschwitz and what happened there.
8. Yom Kippur is one of the most important Jewish holidays. Research the meaning and customs of this holiday. Why do you think this is the holiday that the story emphasizes?
9. Though it was a very dangerous thing to do, prisoners in some of the Nazi concentration camps created underground camp newspapers. Create a secret camp newspaper for the Parschnitz labor camp.
10. Write a story about what happened to one of the characters after the story ends, e.g., Herr Schmidt, Kayla, Katerina, Frau Hawlik, or Dora.

## For Further Reference

Del Negro, Janice. Review of Torn Thread.

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Book (May 2000): 53. Del Negro calls this an accessible survival story, which avoids epic drama and focuses on the small choices that keep the two sisters alive.

Golodetz, Virginia. Review of Torn Thread.

School Library Journal, vol. 46 (April 2000):

136. Golodetz comments that this novel, as a powerful testament to the human spirit, provides much opportunity for discussion.

Lewis, Valerie. "Meet the Author: Anne Isaacs." Instructor, vol. 104 (March 1995): 76. In this brief interview, Isaacs recalls her childhood reading and her experiences in writing for children.

Review of Torn Thread. Book Report, vol. 19 (May/June 2000): 63. This reviewer comments on the author's use of rich detail to document a dehumanizing situation while at the same time highlighting the humanity, family devotion, and friendships of Eva and Rachel.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

Readers who enjoy *Torn Thread* will also be interested in exploring some of the many fine Holocaust novels and memoirs written for young adults in recent years. For example, the novels of Carol Matas, including *Greater than Angels*, *In My Enemy's House*, *After the War*, and *Daniel's Story*, tell realistic stories of the challenges faced by teenagers during this period. *Devil's Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen and *Anne Frank and Me* by Cherie Bennett use time switch fantasies to make the Holocaust real for contemporary readers by placing characters from the present in the middle of this horrific past. *No Pretty Pictures* by Anita Lobel, *Thanks to My Mother* by Schoschana Rabinovici, and *Four Perfect Pebbles* by Lila Pearl and Marion Blumenthal Lazan are the memoirs of survivors written specifically for a young adult audience.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996