

Two Suns in the Sky Short Guide

Two Suns in the Sky by Miriam Bat-Ami

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Overview

Two Suns in the Sky is both a historical telling of the Jews' plight in post-World War II America and a love story between two fifteen-year-olds, Christine (Chris) Cook, a Catholic American, and Adam Bornstein, a Jewish Holocaust survivor from Yugoslavia.

Adam and his family live with nearly a thousand other refugees in Fort Ontario, a refugee camp in Oswego, New York, and Chris lives in the town of Oswego, among narrow-minded and prejudiced people, like her father, who feel a hostility toward the refugees and a hatred of their culture. BatAmi's book is about a culture clash, and it chronicles the tense relations between Jews and Americans at a place and time in history when both groups had to struggle to reconcile two worlds. Chris and Adam ignore the culture clash and create a world of their own when Chris sneaks into the camp, meets Adam, and the two begin a passionate romance. Chris and Adam are not unlike other fictional star-crossed lovers: Romeo and Juliet, Catherine and Heathciff, Pyramus and Thisbe, and Tony and Maria. Their love transcends cultures and religions, and the story of their struggle touches the hearts of anyone wishing to believe in the power of love and hoping to find acceptance and tolerance in a prejudiced world.

About the Author

Miriam Bat-Ami was born on June 26, 1950 in Scranton, Pennsylvania. She grew up in a Jewish home—her father, Simon, was a rabbi—and she attended college at Hebrew University in Jerusalem where she received her bachelor of arts degree in 1974. She married Ronald Rubens in 1976, and continued her education in America. She obtained a master of arts from California State University in 1980 and a doctorate degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1989.

Bat-Ami has always been interested in teaching young adults and increasing their awareness of multicultural issues. She worked as a tutor and a teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL), and as an executive assistant at the Israeli Consulate in Los Angeles. Since 1994, she has been an English professor at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. Today, Bat-Ami lives in Mattawan, Michigan, with her husband Ronald and two sons, Aaron and Daniel, and she continues to research and publish multicultural short stories, books for children and young adults, journal articles, and literary criticism. She has achieved acclaim for her historical fiction and nonfiction for children and young adults. Bat-Ami won first prize in the CELERY Short Story Award for "Nielah," and, in 1999, she received the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction for *Two Suns in the Sky*. She continues to write and to travel around the country and speak to school groups, using her experience researching and writing *Two Suns in the Sky* to teach young writers about the investigative work necessary to write historical fiction.

Setting

Bat-Ami sets her story in a refugee shelter at Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York.

This was a real refugee center, but a littleknown one, established by the United States government in the fall of 1944 to house about one thousand refugees from Italy and help these people escape from Hitler's persecution. The novel begins in the last year of World War II, after Italy has been liberated and the Jewish people have been released. But Adam and the other Jews who left Rome for the shelter in America find nothing liberating about living in the refugee camp in a country they believed to be "the home of the free." Chris and Adam find that persecution against the Jews continues in America, and they discover that they are in for quite a battle as they attempt to nurture a love amidst prejudice and intolerance.

The refugee camp of Two Suns in the Sky is bleak and grim, and in sharp contrast to the love Chris and Adam share. Both of them live in a gray world until they come together; Chris lives outside the camp, but sneaks in and falls in love with Adam. She is as susceptible to cultural intolerance as Adam, whose life behind a barbed wire fence attests to the hypocrisy in the notion of freedom in America. Hazel Rochman in her review of Bat-Ami's book in *Booklist* refers to *Two Suns in the Sky* as documentary fiction. Both the realistic setting of the story and the author's note document the political environment at the end of the war, with Bat-Ami using actual camp records and quotes from President Roosevelt, the refugees, and townspeople to add historical significance to the text.



Social Sensitivity

Bat-Ami's book takes one group of people victimized by ethnic cleansing and explores their experiences adjusting to life in America. But in using this one example—the Jews at Fort Ontario—she underscores the difficulty all groups of people victimized by ethnic cleansing experience when they encounter American intolerance. From Bat-Ami's story, readers can make generalizations about America's attitude toward immigrants and refugees and form their own opinions as to how this attitude affects the development of a multicultural nation.

Many groups of people came to America expecting to live in a free land, but their dreams were shattered. True, they did attain freedom from Hitler, or from mass extermination from any dictator, but they would never be truly free from prejudice.

In America, as well as in Europe, these refugees felt like second-class citizens.

Bat-Ami addresses the reality of American intolerance by making Chris's father an example of the American bigot. He hates anything foreign, anything different from himself, yet he seems to justify his prejudice toward the Jews because he lives in America and not in Germany. Chris's father helps explain American attitudes during World War II, and Bat-Ami explains the effects this attitude had on the Jewish immigrants.

She shows sensitivity to the plight of the Jews by revealing Adam's inner thoughts, and she introduces the possibility of a tolerant nation by emphasizing Chris's willingness to share her thoughts and her love with Adam.

Bat-Ami is a natural teacher, and she has succeeded in writing a thought-provoking novel that instructs without being moralistic. She has always been sensitive to differences in people and cultures, so she created characters like Chris and Adam who show that same sensitivity and who embody the hope of a tolerant nation. Chris and Adam manage to find the commonality between them and they learn from each other's life experiences. By focusing on their love in the face of hatred, Bat-Ami fosters an acceptance of other worlds and a sensitivity toward other cultures and other ways of life.

To help readers accept diversity and work toward becoming a truly multicultural nation, it is essential that Bat-Ami define the political environment of the times. She explores the refugee issue sensitively, revealing not only the thoughts and attitudes of Chris and Adam, but also of the other Jews in the camp, of Chris's father, and of the townspeople in Oswego. Probing the views of all these people brings to light sociopolitical issues that urge readers to examine their own views about tolerance. Her book stimulates people to think about how immigrants feel when they come to America struggling to be free and yearning to affirm their cultural identity in a prejudiced society. Chris, in her love for Adam, affirms his Jewishness and disregards stereotypes. The struggle of these two people to unite leads them not only to accept diversity, but also to better understand themselves. Chris and Adam embody the ideal of a world where people from diverse

cultures can overcome their prejudices and transcend socioreligious hatred and other conflicts. By making her story a love story, Bat-Ami's poignant message rings clear—we must all search for what binds us together rather than dwell on what drives us apart.

Literary Qualities

Bat-Ami manages to present both sides of the immigrant issue—that of the American residents and that of the refugees—by telling her story in two first-person narratives. She relates the American viewpoint in the voice of Chris, and she relates the immigrant viewpoint in the voice of Adam.

The story therefore unfolds in alternating perspectives, and the individual voices of the two main characters are as distinct and diverse as their cultures, their language, and their religion. Bat-Ami seems to have a talent for creating realistic dialogue, and she uses that talent to give depth and substance to her characters. Using two first person narratives not only gives readers insight into the private thoughts of both an American citizen and a Jewish refugee, but it allows Bat-Ami to explain the culture clash that permeates the novel and defines the political environment of the time she revisits.

Bat-Ami's novel is both a historical documentary fiction novel and a tale of personal experience. She allows Chris and Adam to tell their stories, but then she intertwines the plots. She also embellishes her story with quotations from former residents of the refugee camp and from President Roosevelt. These quotations, as well as a detailed Author's Note, place the novel in historical perspective. Bat-Ami's gift for characterization, her realistic dialogue, and her sense of drama all add to the book's authenticity.

The story of Chris and Adam emerges as a realistic portrayal of youthful optimism as well as a realistic account of historical strife and the isolation the Jewish refugees experienced when they arrived in the New World. The love between Chris and Adam transcends the boundaries that relegate them to separate worlds. The existence of such boundaries revolves around the symbolism of the fence. The fence is the most prominent symbol in the novel, and the first image of America the refugees encounter when they arrive at the camp. Bat-Ami describes the barbed wire and the armed guards surrounding the refugee center, and she makes it clear that the immigrants recognize this place from the disturbingly similar concentration camps in Europe. Arriving at the refugee center and seeing the fence lead the Jewish refugees to the painful conclusion that their dream of finding freedom in America is only an illusion. In reality, they left one set of barriers only to encounter a new one, and though they did manage to escape Hitler's persecution, they could never escape their feelings of isolation.

The symbolism of the fence extends beyond the refugee camp to the town, where the residents of Oswego put up other metaphorical fences to separate themselves from the immigrants. Chris and Adam both feel fenced in by their separate worlds, and language, religion, family, and society are all metaphorical fences that keep Chris and Adam apart. But determined lovers can scale fences, and they can find ways to break barriers. Chris and Adam use the hole under the fence that surrounds the refugee center to sneak in and out of the camp.



The image of two suns in the sky appears to refer to the commonality of separate worlds, and Chris and Adam find those two suns. On the boat to America, Adam recalls a legend his father told him when Adam witnessed a sunset and believed the sun and the moon to be two suns: "On the water was a reflection of the setting sun. In the sky was the rising moon, which appeared orange because of the sun's reflection shining back on it. With the orange moon rising and the sun descending, there seemed to be two suns in the sky." Adam continues: "Then I was reminded of a legend Papa once told Villi and me: A man who sees two suns in the sky is never the same."



Themes and Characters

Two Suns in the Sky is a complex novel in which Bat-Ami spins a poignant love story that captures the culture clash characteristic of post-World War II America.

Chris Cook is a Catholic girl who lives in Oswego, New York, and Adam Bornstein is a Yugoslavian Jew who fled to Rome under threat of persecution, then escaped to America after Italy was liberated. The lives and experiences of these two characters could not be more different. But though Chris and Adam come from different worlds, they experience universal emotions.

The first chapter begins with Chris, and we find out quickly that she is bored living in a small town and that she is experiencing the restlessness typical of fifteen-year-old girls. She longs for adventure, she longs for romance. Chris says that she is fed up with the boys her age and that she wants someone older and more mature. "I want to really be kissed," she says. Bat-Ami lets us know right away that Chris is on the brink, ready to do something. She is ready to express strong emotion, to feel something passionately, to fall in love.

When Adam enters the story he, too, is on the brink. He is ready to explore new worlds, both literally and figuratively. He is ready to define himself in new ways and to explore his sexual and cultural identity.

Adam is just fifteen, like Chris, but he has experienced pain to last a lifetime and he knows war from the inside. Adam is confused by America, and Chris is intrigued by the strangers in her town and fascinated with the war she knows little about.

Two Suns in the Sky is a coming-of-age novel, so in the book Bat-Ami dissects the teenage psyche. She allows Chris and Adam to reveal their thoughts and dreams and, in doing so, she reveals universal concerns while contrasting the American teenager with a teenager touched deeply by war.

Adam worries about his missing relatives and he agonizes over living in secrecy, whereas Chris worries about her annoying parents and agonizes over what kind of clothes to buy. It is clear, though, that these two young people are open to new perspectives and capable of understanding ways of life different from their own. Poised on the edge of childhood and adulthood, they are easily moldable; their attitudes about life and love are not yet developed enough to restrict them from moving the world.

Faced with the possibility of exploring foreign concepts, Chris and Adam suddenly find the world a new and intriguing place.

Chris feels curious and captivated with the refugees as Adam feels curious and captivated with the Americans. The willingness of these teenagers to explore each other's world lets us know that Bat-Ami's vision extends far beyond the narrow-mindedness of the townspeople. All of the people of Oswego get excited when the



refugee camp opens, but many of them have already been tainted by prejudice and have decided that these immigrants do not belong in their town. Bat-Ami uses Chris's father as a model of the American bigot. He warns his daughter to stay away from the refugees, and he refers to them as "somebody else's dirt." If at first Chris appears to be in danger of becoming narrow-minded and materialistic like her father, we quickly realize that she is simply naive and has no understanding of human suffering. Chris feels compelled to sneak down to the camp and find out what these people are all about. That is when she meets Adam, and she is instantly captivated with him.

Eventually, Adam and the other refugees are allowed to leave the camp and go to the local school, and the relationship between Adam and Chris escalates. Though both of these young people are fascinated by the unknown and willing to explore each other's world, they live in an intolerant society, and encounter numerous barriers—barriers they need to break in order to explore their own sexuality and their own racial and religious identity.

Chris's parents are strict Catholics and Adam's parents are Jewish. Chris's father is narrow-minded and controlling, and he forbids his daughter from seeing Adam. At one point he strikes her and he kicks Chris out of the house. But because love knows no bounds, she sees Adam anyway. Both of these young adults are at a crossroads in life and, like any adolescent, eager to broaden their horizons. Both Adam and Chris want excitement and independence, and as they venture out on their own to find these things, they develop a bond that bridges cultures and religions.

To Chris's father, and to all the people he represents, Jews and Catholics should remain separate, like night and day, sun and moon. The refugees should remain inside the fence that surrounds their camp, and the Americans should remain outside it.

But Chris and Adam both feel trapped on their side of the fence; Chris feels trapped in the boring life of Oswego and Adam feels trapped in the camp. Feeling trapped is one theme Bat-Ami advances in the novel. As these young teenagers keep encountering metaphorical fences that keep them confined in separate worlds, they become more and more determined to break down the barriers and to find holes under the fences.

Chris and Adam add freshness to this novel by introducing the promise of love in a world full of hatred. In their search for love, they romanticize the world, so what Bat-Ami wishes to convey here is the power of love in a more general sense. What could be more contrasting than love and war? If love knows no bounds, and if Chris and Adam represent separate identities, then the love that Chris and Adam share represents not just a bond between two people, but a bond between two cultures and two religions. This is their dream for a postwar America. It begs the question of whether the love of two hopeful teenagers can survive in the postwar world as it truly is, not in the postwar world of their dreams.

In telling her story, Bat-Ami contrasts the real with the ideal, the optimistic with the disenchanting. Her subplots involving Chris's and Adam's lives clarify the contrast between worldviews. The war means different things to Chris than to Adam. To Chris the

war is "an abstraction"—something that happened "over there" that she could easily ignore because it never touched her life in any significant way. To a large extent, Chris romanticized the war, just as Adam romanticized America. Though Adam and Chris have vastly different pasts and therefore vastly different life-views, the bond they share allows them to influence each other and broaden each other's perspectives. Though in the end, the two characters move in separate directions, the relationship they shared changed them forever.

They found a commonality among difference, recognized the likeness in divergent worlds. It must have been Bat-Ami's intent to introduce this possibility. As Martha Walke says in her review of the book for HornBook Magazine, "the relationship Chris and Adam shared led them to an understanding of who they are, what they mean to each other, and what they want in a postwar world." What they want is what they saw when they opened themselves up to each other—not a sun and moon, but two suns in the sky.

Topics for Discussion

1. What attracts Chris to the refugee camp?
2. Discuss the various groups of people victimized by ethnic cleansing.
3. Why do you suppose that few people knew about the refugee camp in Oswego?
4. Do you think that the Jews who came to America and lived in the refugee center considered themselves Americans? Why or why not?
5. How does Christine's father justify his attitude toward the Jews?
6. Who acts more maturely in the novel, the young adult protagonists or their parents? Explain the definition of maturity you consider in answering this question.
7. Was the outcome of Chris and Adam's relationship predictable? Why or why not?
8. What significance does Mira play in the story?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write a comparison of the romance between Chris and Adam and either Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, or Tony and Maria from *West Side Story*. Discuss the forces that tear them apart and the forces that bring them together.
2. Contrast Adam's view of World War II with Chris's view.
3. Clearly, Adam and Christine come from backgrounds that could not be more different. Do they find common ground?

Detail the similarities these teenagers share when it appears that their differences are overpowering.

4. Discuss point of view in *Two Suns in the Sky*. Do you think the story would be as poignant if Bat-Ami chose to tell her story from one perspective—either Chris's or Adam's? Why or why not?
5. Compare the Jewish immigrant experience in the Oswego refugee camp to the Japanese experience in and after their stay in internment camps.
6. Compare the Jewish immigrant experience during World War II with the Albanian refugee experience, wherein thousands of refugees are arriving in America from Kosovo.
7. The Emergency Refugee Center at Fort Ontario (that is, the Jewish refugee camp in Oswego) is not well known. Research the camp and write a paper that captures the experiences of the immigrants who resided there.
8. Discuss the symbolism of fences in the novel.
9. Compare the Jewish experience in concentration camps in Europe to the Jewish experience in the refugee camp in Oswego.
10. How would you compare America's treatment of the Jewish refugees with homeless people? Do you feel they are both homeless?
11. How did the refugee experience contribute to the establishment of the state of Israel?

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Related Titles

Perhaps the title most closely related to *Two Suns in the Sky* is *Good Night, Maman*, by Norma Fox Mazer. Like *Bat-Ami*, Mazer focuses on the camp in Oswego, but Mazer tells the refugee story through the eyes of Karin Levi, who had to leave Europe without her ailing mother or her father, who was captive at Auschwitz. In first-person narrative, Mazer discusses Karin's wartime experiences: her escape to America, her arrival at Oswego, and her struggle to adjust to American culture while dealing with the pain of leaving loved ones behind. Other young adult novels that help bring the Holocaust into focus include *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, and Ida Vos's *Anna Is Still Here* and *Dancing on the Bridge of Avignon*. The protagonists in all of these books are Jewish, and they all recount their experiences of persecution by the Nazi regime.

Another book that focuses on the immigrant experience is *The Melting Pot: An Adventure in New York*, a novel set at the turn of the century that recounts the life of a young Russian immigrant in New York.

Sonia Levitin's *Journey to America* and its two sequels, *Silver Days* and *Annie's Promise*, tell the story of a young girl named Lisa Platt and the hardships she experiences escaping from Berlin, then living in Switzerland during the Nazi era and waiting with her mother and two sisters for her father to come and get her. *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne and James Houston and *No-No Boy* by John Okada talk about the wartime experiences of Japanese Americans who were imprisoned in internment camps during the war then, like the Jews, were released into a prejudiced, intolerant society that treated them like second-class citizens.



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