We Were Not Like Other People Short Guide

We Were Not Like Other People by Ephraim Sevela

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Overview

Aspects of Jewish life in communist Soviet Union during pre-World War II under the Stalinist purges are, for many people, often topics merely encountered in history texts. We Were Not Like Other People gives life and reality to many of the people and events of that time and place. The story encourages the reader to achieve selfidentification with the process of growing up and developing personal moral and ethical values. Despite the differences between the physical and psychological conditions experienced by the main character of the novel and many of its readers, the values illuminated are universal.

Depending on the reader's purposes and background knowledge, the novel can be read at various levels of understanding and enjoyment. It can be read for its entertainment and escape values by the reader who is simply interested in following the gripping adventures of the hero. It can be read for realistic insights into life in a faraway place during a critical time by the reader concerned with developing a context for historical facts. At the same time, the novel includes attention to the universal conflicts associated with growing into adulthood and establishing codes of moral and ethical values. The novel explores the meaning and challenges of determining good and evil, loyalty and faithfulness, freedom and bondage, compassion and lack of pity, love and hate, tolerance and racism.

All of these concerns are implicit, not didactically treated in the novel.

The main character of the novel demonstrates outstanding fortitude as he copes with and, somehow, manages to overcome many of the obstacles he encounters as he wanders from placeto-place. He meets characters who are unselfish in sharing their scant possessions and their warmth and wisdom.

He also meets characters who are pathetic in their weakness and those determined to pursue their power plays regardless of circumstances. The remarkable dimensions of human nature and the human condition are sensitively and subtly treated in the story.

In many ways an adventure story, action in We Were Not Like Other People is fast-moving, dramatic, often tragic, sometimes humorous, and always compelling. Suspense is high in each episode as the reader is challenged to discover its outcome. Suspense is maintained throughout the story as the eventual fate of the main character is awaited.

About the Author

E phraim Sevela was born in Bobruisk, Soviet Union on March 8, 1928, the son of Joel E. Sevela, a sportsman, and Rachel Gelfand Sevela. His education in the Soviet Union included attendance at the University of Minsk from 1945-1948. On September 19, 1959 he married Julia Gendelstein, an actress, with whom he has two children.

Sevela's career has reflected various interests and talents. He worked as a journalist in Vilna, Soviet Union and as a script writer and file director in Moscow. Particularly notable are the scripts he wrote in the Russian language for eight feature films in the Soviet Union.

He was a member of the Union of Soviet Film Makers.

In 1971, Sevela and twenty-three other Soviet Jews staged a sit-in strike at the Supreme Soviet (the legislative body of the U.S.S.R.) to protest the country's restrictive emigration policies. The group is credited with staging the first political strike that led to the beginning of Jewish immigration to Israel. Instead of inflicting the expected punishment on the strikers, the government, surprisingly, allowed them and many other Jews to emigrate. Following worldwide protests over the denial of his own exit visa, Sevela was eventually allowed to leave the Soviet Union and take up residency in Israel.

Sevela has also resided in the United States. His books for young adults are We Were Not Like Other People, translated from the Russian by Antonina W. Bouis, 1989; Pochemu net raia na zemie, translation by Richard Lourie, Stav, Jerusalem, 1982, published in America as Why There Is No Heaven On Earth, 1982.

Setting

The story of We Were Not Like Other People takes place in the Soviet Union during the late 1930s and the early 1940s. The places that are mentioned, though not explored explicitly, bear names such as Minsk, Kiev, Moscow, Orel, Leningrad, the Urals, and Siberia.

The scenery is integral to the story and brilliantly described; it is inclusive of snow-covered mountains, green, grassy plains, forests, farms, steppes, wheat fields, refugee shelters, and the Kuznetsk Coal Basin. Institutions such as the home, the school, military commands, factories utilizing child labor, refugee camps, and dugouts are all part of the backdrop for the major action and themes of the novel. The places, nature itself, and the personalities of the characters establish the mood of the story. The foreboding presence of a communist regime and the throes of an approaching war and war itself cannot be escaped.

We Were Not Like Other People is narrated by a young Jewish boy whose name is never revealed. It soon becomes clear, however, that his name is irrelevant as he could be one of countless others like him in the Soviet Union at the time of the story. A clear picture of the boy emerges through descriptions of his home, his parents, his shaved head, his starched white shirt, red tie, customs in his home and his attitudes toward the military, his country, and religion.

The story begins with vignettes from the everyday home life, the rearing and schooling of the boy who is the son of a commander in the People's and Peasant's Red Army. The period is marked by the simultaneous challenges imposed by the Stalinist purges (mass execution of people considered dangerous to the state) and preparation for World War II. The boy lives in a military command and attends school in an atmosphere charged with "spy mania," with friends betraying friends, and families decimated by the loss of fathers to authorities and the subsequent banishing of remaining family members to Siberia. Yet the suspenseful circumstances are often regarded by the boy and his peers as fun and games. The boy's ambition is to grow up to become a man worthy of the accolades of his countrymen. His patriotism and loyalty to the Soviet homeland and to Generalissimo Stalin tend to be excessive and, even, misdirected.

The boy's "hero" is that of a boy his age rumored to have denounced his father to the authorities and paid for the act with his life. The fascination for this "martyr" suggests the boy's capability of imagining a similar fate for himself. While the boy's parents suspect his capacity for possible betrayal, they do not admonish him nor do they articulate their fears. A dramatic turn of events begins for the boy at the arrest of his father in which the boy inadvertently participates by announcing the family name to interrogators.

Although there is evidence that the boy and his family are different from other people, the full impact of this difference is not apparent until the end of the story, which conveys the idea that even the worst of conditions and differences may be overcome successfully.

Social Sensitivity

We Were Not Like Other People will suit many youths in middle school and upward. Even with this stipulation, individual differences must be taken into account in determination of the novel's suitability for the particular readers. The content of the novel may not be grasped easily in the absence of some background knowledge of the time, places, and prevailing ethos depicted in the novel. The graphic horror scenes, especially, those appearing in the Prologue, may be upsetting for younger readers. Profanity is used by several of the characters and some background knowledge is required for a reader to understand the naturalness of its use in particular contexts. While there is some sexual explicitness in the novel, it is handled with taste and appropriateness. There is no attempt to sensationalize any social topic. All such topics are required for the true portrayal of the environment in which the story takes place.

Literary Qualities

Sevela uses a wide variety of techniques to maintain the mood of the story, the reader's interest and involvement, and themes as the story progresses. The plot of We Were Not Like Other People unfolds through a series of episodes rather than through a single major occurrence or situation. The episodes are held together by the persistent background and the continuous struggle of the main character to survive. Spanning a period of six years, the episodes provide for the appearance of numerous characters and a fo cus on those experiences that are most influential on the character and attitudes of the hero. Action in each episode leads to its own resolution and is generally contained in one or two chapters.

Sevela uses carefully chosen expressions, vivid descriptions, meaningful dialogue and unusual grammatical structures that make the first-person narrative easy to read. The rhythm of the text is maintained through use of a style of writing that often tends to be poetic. Sentences tend to be short, graphic, and sometimes inventive in structure. In one instance, for example, Sevela has the narrator of the story make reference to the idea that war is "etched in a single image of the memory of everyone who has experienced it." The narrator then describes how, in his recollection of war, he sees only one thing: "That was the bone. With a jagged break. A human bone, a leg bone. . ."

Set as it is in a real historical period in real places, the novel has a distinctive aura of reality. It provides a tacit invitation to the interested reader to learn more about the Soviet Union and some of the critical events that affected the lives of the people during the period of the story. Although not specifically described, the plight of the Russian Jews permeates the story. How communism affected the lives of the peasants and ordinary citizens of the Soviet Union can be inferred from many of the scenes and events in the story.

Sevela maintains suspense from episode to episode through vivid descriptions of perils confronting the hero. For example, in Chapter One, the reader can sense the danger in which the boy and his mother find themselves: "Both the animals and we were afraid of the quickly approaching night and the ever-increasing wind. It was the start of a blizzard. Soon the match stick telegraph poles were gone, as if the wind mixed with snow had licked them away . . . the poles had been the last landmarks."

Sevela uses flashbacks in order to provide the context for much of the action. Use of this technique, however, demands alertness and careful attention by the reader. Otherwise, distinctions between what is currently happening and what has occurred in the past may become blurred. This is one reason that multiple readings of the novel may be profitable. Yet, because of the direct images, use of vivid descriptions, and fast-moving action, the book can be read with interest during a first reading.

Through conversations by some of the characters, Sevela touches, at times, upon the matter of religion. The boy's mother tells him, "You're dying . . .

This is the end." "Lord. My mother was calling to the murky sky . . . You won't abandon an orphan. I was the orphan and she was talking to God. My mother was talking to God. I knew that she did not believe in God and had taught me not to . . ." And later: "The boy saw that his mother was lying on a black iron cross, hanging like one crucified ... . 'We're saved! We're going to live!'"

Themes and Characters

Numerous characters appear in We Were Not Like Other People yet the majority of these make short appearances and are important only for maintaining the themes of the story. For example, the boy's sister and the boy's aunt are important only for creating the image of a viable family group. Little else is revealed of them. Some characters appear only for the development of a particular episode. One such character is an unnamed woman with whom the boy negotiates an exchange of wheat for her skirt. In many instances only one side of a character is revealed although the character is essential in the development of the boy's ethical and moral behavior. One of these is an eighty-five-year- old man who admonishes the boy to be careful around the women he is then supervising or "you'll lose your authority."

The boy who narrates the story is a major and pivotal character around whom all the actions revolve. Told in the first person, everything is seen from the boy's perspective. In this sense, the novel resembles an autobiography. The character of the boy is well rounded with strengths and weaknesses often apparent. Neither an allgood nor all-bad person, the boy is at times admirable; at other times, less so.

At the start of the story, the boy is nine years old and clearly the product of his time and place. He is comparatively privileged, and proud of the status he enjoys as son of the commander of a regiment. He idolizes his parents and hungers for more overt expressions of their love. Physically, the boy is frail and weak, lacking in courage and often bullied by his peers. Forced by his mother to deal with bullies on his own, eventually he develops strength, courage, agility, and a reputation for toughness. During his adventures, growing up alone in the world, the boy's moral and ethical values are developed. At the end of the story he is essentially a good person uncorrupted by the circumstances through which he has been forced to live. His feelings for his family are marked by love and loyalty, and he has become a sensitive, caring, and compassionate person.

The boy's mother, who appears only briefly at the beginning and end of the story, is, nevertheless, a major character. Her influence on the boy's attitudes toward religion, courage and other aspects of moral and ethical development is significant. Unable to tolerate weakness, she deals with the boy's lack of courage in a typically unorthodox manner. When the story begins, she is renowned in her region for her athletic prowess. She is lovely, strong, determined, concerned about the boy's welfare but undemonstrable in her love for him. She praises the boy for signs of courage and strength and keeps alive his ambitions and ideas for what it means to become a man.

The boy's father is also regarded in the region as an outstanding and unsurpassed athlete and is the commander of a calvary-artillery division in the Red Army. Strict, tough, brave, daring, admired, feared, and even loved by the men he commands, the father is clearly a role model that his son would like to emulate. As in the case of the mother, the father of the boy appears only at the beginning and end of the story.

Senior Lieutenant Manko, the "Horse Doctor," is noted for excellent performance of duty despite the unsavoriness of his personal habits and conduct.

Manko is more important to the division than a "people doctor" would have been because of the crucial role of the horses in the cavalry. Often drunk, always profane, Manko, a bachelor, is abhorred by the wives and mothers who consider him to be a bad influence on their husbands and children. It is no secret that Manko, who becomes a confidante to the boy, prefers horses to people because, as he states, "a horse as opposed to a man won't betray you, but will repay kindness in double."

Manko's appearance is limited to the first part of the narrative, but his effect on the boy's ideas is profound. He is the first person in the boy's life who undertakes to admonish him severely, harshly, and frankly regarding the disaster of misdirecting one's loyalty.

Noting the boy's fascination for the "rumored" hero who betrayed his father for the sake of his country, Manko cautioned the boy, "You can't trade your father for an idea, no matter how wonderful it might seem . . . there is nothing higher than a father . . . his blood is in you . . . your roots are in him. You are one indivisible. If you cut down the root, you wilt yourself."

Ivan Alexandrovich, an old teacher allowed to continue teaching geography to the younger children after the end of the "tsarists" days, saves the boy's life when they chance to meet in Orel as they flee the Germans. Ivan and his wife become the first in a succession of characters who go to great lengths to help the boy.

Two characters encountered in a factory where the boy works for awhile influence development of the boy's character. One of these is Foreman Kostenko who takes the entire group of boys to a theater in Sverdlovski to see a performance of Kostantin Simonov's play, "Wait for Me." The poem, "Wait for Me and I'll Return, but Wait Very Hard" makes an impression on the boy's developing concept of the meaning and importance of loyalty. Another character, Roman, one of the boy's peers and the unchallenged "ruler" of the dormitory in which the boy lives, causes him to have an experience that demonstrates that freedom is not always considered a value, especially by persons unaccustomed to it.

Polina Sergeyevna, the mother of five girls, rescues the boy from neardeath and tries to make him "man of the family." Polina longs for the son she has never had. Mutual kindnesses and sacrifices are shared by the boy and the family until an act by the boy, misinterpreted by Polina, results in his eviction.

Colonel Galemba, commander of a special regiment whose mission is to shoot at tanks instead of planes, rescues the boy from a poverty-stricken street existence and "adopts" him as his son. Not liking the boy's Jewish name, Colonel Galemba names him "Youth in his prime." Colonel Galemba helps the boy, now fifteen years old, develop a variety of behaviors he perceives as being adult. Colonel Galemba harbors the unrealized dream of sending the boy to the university.

Pavel Ivanovich Samokhin, last in the line of the boy's benefactors, "adopts" the boy after the accidental death of Colonel Galemba and plans to have him become a member of his family at the end of the war. A chance remark by Samokhin, overheard by the boy, causes the boy to run away. In running away from Samokhin, the boy establishes his adulthood and the story ends surprisingly.

Topics for Discussion

1. How should a person respond to a request that requires a suspension of one's moral standards?

2. Can matters of right and wrong be determined apart from the context in which the decisions are required?

3. What kinds of standards or moral values should guide an individual when faced with making a choice to help someone else or save himself?

4. Why did the author of We Were Not Like Other People choose not to give the hero a name?

5. What did the narrator hope to achieve by revealing the family name to the authorities when his parents would not?

6. Would the results have been different if the boy had not interfered with the investigation of his parents' true identity?

7. Would techniques used by the mother of the narrator to help him learn to defend himself from the neighborhood bullies be approved of in American society? What other courses of action might have been taken by the mother?

8. Was the boy's mother acting in accordance with her true beliefs when she taught him that she and he had no God?

9. Did the narrator interpret Samokhin's racial attitudes accurately when he stated: "It didn't occur to anyone that I was the only Jew among them.

Samokhin, who knew, never gave it a second thought. For him I was who I was. The last thing he thought about was whether I was Jewish, Turkish, or something else?"

10. What evidence was given in the story that may have helped the boy interpret Samokhin's attitude toward Jews earlier and more accurately?

11. Is it possible to be prejudiced against a race as a group and not be prejudiced against an individual member of that group?

12. In the Prelude, there is a scene in which the boy thinks he is granting the request of one of his peers when he agrees to maim the peer's hand in order to help him gain respite from work in the factory. Why did the peer regard the boy with contempt afterward?

13. When Samokhin obliged a dying soldier by granting his request to be shot, the boy was sickened by observ ing the act. Why did Samokhin oblige the solder and, afterward, whisper, "Lord, you, alone, are the judge"?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare the part of the world that was the Soviet Union during the time of We Were Not Like Other People with what it has now become. Identify geographic, social, and political differences.

2. Examine Ephraim Sevela's background and discuss why he is qualified to write knowledgeably about life in the Soviet Union during the time of the novel.

3. The boy's mother was said not to fit the usual picture of a Jewish mother. Describe several stereotypes held about people from various cultural groups.

4. Can a person's true nature be determined on the basis of observable characteristics? How would you characterize Manko?

5. Compare the characteristics of Colonel Galemba and Samokhin. Who was the most trustworthy? Why?

6. During present-day wars, what provisions do countries make for the care of children left orphaned and homeless?

7. What are some of the specific lessons learned by the hero of the story that contributed to development of his moral and ethical values?

8. What are some of the features of We Were Not Like Other People that might make it equally appealing to boys and girls?

For Further Reference

Bowden, Jane A., ed. "Ephraim Sevela." In Contemporary Authors. Vols. 69-72. Detroit: Gale Research, 1978: 524. This is a brief autobiographical sketch of Sevela's early life, career, and writings. Works in progress, at the time of this publication, are indicated.

Cline, Ralph M. "A Killer Curriculum: Violence and Death in Literature." Pointer 32,4 (Summer 1988): 21-23. Presents pros and cons for the use of literature that contains violence in the school curriculum. It concludes that literature containing violence should be read by students but should be counterbalanced with books emphasizing happiness and hope.

Lesniak, James G., ed. "Ephraim Sevela." In Contemporary Authors New Revision Series. Vol. 30. Detroit: Gale, 1984: 394-395. This is a more detailed autobiographical sketch of Sevela's life, career, and writings than that found in the earlier edition of Contemporary Authors, including nonfiction, novels for adults, and novels for young adults.

Markfield, Wallace. "Review of Why There Is No Heaven on Earth by Ephraim Sevela." Sunday New York Times Book Review, section 7 (April 25, 1982): 35. This review calls attention to the lyrical and philosophical nature of Sevela's writing style. It provides insight into his focus on the adventurous nature of boys' groups. In many ways the style and content of Why There Is No Heaven On Earth compares with Sevela's treatment of these in We Were Not Like Other People.

Related Titles

Sevela's books for young adults, Why There Is No Heaven On Earth and We Were Not Like Other People, deal with Jewish life in pre-World War II in the Soviet Union. In the New York Times Book Review, April 25, 1982, Wallace Manfield described Why There Is No Heaven on Earth as "one of the most beautifully written and deeply felt novels that I have encountered about the half-chivalric, half-criminal universe that young boys inhabit." He declared that the novel was "done so quietly and simply, so effectively, that one forgets the art. But Ephraim Sevela, like all fine artists, does not have to insist on his artistry." The book was equally highly praised in the Horn Book magazine where it was called "a lamentation, a celebration, an enquiry into questions of justice and fate."

Sevela is the author of several books for adults, many of which can be read profitably by young adults. The subject matter of Sevela's books, whether fiction or nonfiction, generally is reflective of some aspects of life of Jews in the Soviet Union or in Israel. Among his titles of fictional works are: Legends from Invalid Street (stories), translation by Anthony Kahn, 1974; Truth Is for Strangers: A Novel About a Soviet Poet, translation by Antonio W. Bouis, 1976, published in the original Russian as Viking, 1981; and The Standard Bearer, translation by Donald Arthur, 1983.

Farewell Israel, translation by Edmond Browne, 1977, is a nonfictional book in which Sevela expresses the disillusionment that he and some of his fellow Jews felt when they found that life in Israel failed to meet their expectations.

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