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Prestwick House Response Journal



The Devil's Arithmetic Jane Yollen



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Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection-that is, stopping to think about what you are reading-that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

The Devil's Arithmetic

Chapter 1

1. Passover (called "Pesach" in Hebrew) is a Jewish holiday celebrated for eight days honoring the deliverance of the ancient Hebrews from slavery. The Seder is a feast in Jewish homes on the first evening of Passover, which, like all Jewish holidays, starts at sundown. At this family celebration, the Haggadah (a book containing the order, or seder, in which the meal should progress and a narrative of the Exodus from Egypt) is read. Some Orthodox Jews also have a feast on the second night of Passover. The name Passover is from the Book of Exodus in the Torah, which describes how God promised the Israelites that, on the night of the killing of the Egyptian first-born children, the Angel of Death would pass over their homes.

Hannah does not want to attend the family Seder because she and her brother will be the only children there. Can you understand how she feels? Write a letter to Hannah letting her know that you understand. In the letter, help Hannah to recognize the special significance and importance of the Seder feast.

2. In the following passage from the book, Hannah comments on her mother's habitual sighing.

"...Will lost everyone but your Aunt Eva. A family of eight all but wiped out." She sighed again but Hannah suspected there was little sympathy in that sigh. It was more like punctuation. Instead of putting periods at the ends of sentences, her mother signed.

In one paragraph, similar to the example above, write about a mannerism of one of your family members that you find annoying.

3. At the end of this chapter Hannah goes into the bathroom to wash off the lipstick mark left on her forehead by her Aunt Eva's kiss. As Hannah, write a diary entry discussing your conflicting feelings about Aunt Eva. The Devil's Arithmetic

Chapter 3

7. Jane Yolen provides the reader with definitions for most of the Yiddish words and Jewish ceremonies mentioned in the book. Write a dictionary for the terms in this chapter. Look for context clues to find the meanings. For example, the dictionary might have a definition as follows:

Yarmulke: Small, round hat worn by Jewish men during prayers.

- 8. Grandpa Will insists that Hannah is old enough to have a glass of watered-down wine at the Seder feast. Her mother objects, but then she gives in. As Hannah's mother, write a diary entry describing how you feel when Grandpa Will interferes with the way you want to raise your children.
- 9. Hannah does not believe in superstitions such as the Easter Bunny, so she also does not believe that the profit Elijah will come through the door. To her, these are "*baby stories*" and she is too old for such things.

Faith is defined as an unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence. As Hannah's rabbi, write Hannah a letter telling her about the value of faith. Use incidents from your own experience to illustrate the ideas in the letter.

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15. At the end of the chapter, Hannah (Chaya) helps Gitl to clear the dishes from the table. She "seemed to be the only one who was surprised that she was helping."

Rewrite the paragraph at the end of the chapter. In the rewrite, assume that you are the one that has been transported into another time. What chores might you do that would surprise your modern family?

Chapter 6

16. Hannah is having trouble distinguishing between what she believes is a dream and her real life in New York.

Following Gitl into the bedroom, she [Chaya] paused only a moment, wondering without much hope if the door would transport her back to the Bronx. But when she passed through, the small, dark bedroom was still solidly itself. What was dream and what was real were getting harder and harder to distinguish.

Most of us have had nighttime dreams that seem real. When we awaken, we wonder for a moment if the events really happened. Write about the most vivid dream that you can remember having. How did you feel when you awakened?

17. Gitl puts two blue ribbons in Chaya's hair. Gitl explains to Chaya why the ribbons, dress, stockings, and shoes are special to her. She hopes that Chaya will appreciate them.

Write a letter to Gitl letting her know that you also have family treasures that, to a stranger, may seem odd or ugly, but because of their family connection, in your opinion, the items are priceless.

18. Chaya describes the technique she uses to help remember the names of her new friends. Write a letter to Chaya letting her know that you understand this method, and discussing how you might use it to help improve your schoolwork.

The Devil's Arithmetic

46. Rivka helps Hannah to understand the correct words to use in the camp to describe different things. For example, Rivka tells her that to *organize* means to "get" or to "steal." Write a dictionary of camp terms based on Rivka's teachings.

Chapter 16

- 47. As Hannah, write a letter to Aaron telling him about the "Devil's arithmetic."
- 48. All of the Jews hate the three-fingered woman they call the *blokova*. Assume that the three-fingered woman has been put on trial for her crimes at the camp. As the *blokova*, write the speech you might make to the judge in your own defense.
- 49. Sometimes an author states the themes of a book through the minor characters. What theme do you think Yolen is stating in the following excerpt from this chapter?

Fayge is telling the story of Israel and his father. Israel's father says:

Know, my son, that the enemy will always be with you. He will be in the shadow of your dreams and in your living flesh, for he is the other part of yourself. There will be times when he will surround you with walls of darkness. But remember always that your soul is secure to you, for your soul is entire, and that he cannot enter your soul, for your soul is part of God.

Write a dialogue between two students who are discussing the meaning of this passage.

The dialogue might begin as follows:

First Student:The passage is saying that evil is part of man.Second Student:But man must always remember that...