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Hannah thinks tonight Passover Seder will be the same as always. But this year she will be mysteriously transported into the past. Only she knows the horrors that await.

The Devil's Arithmetic Details

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From Reader Review *The Devil's Arithmetic* for online ebook

Kandice says

Five stars for the plot device used to tell this story. This is aimed at very young readers and so the grisly subject matter must be presented in a way that allows them to read it without ruining their sleep. Having the main character, a modern day, young Jewish girl, living in New Rochelle, transported back in time does this splendidly.

My three star review is because I didn't feel the story was written very well after that initial stroke of genius. I must admit that part of this could be that I was expecting a book aimed at teens and this was clearly meant for even younger readers, but I still struggled through after the set up.

K8 says

Twelve year old Hannah is sick of spending Passover 'remembering' the past with her relatives. During the Passover Seder, she is transported to 1942 Poland, where she becomes Chaya (her Hebrew name), the girl she was named for. In this time, she is eventually sent to a concentration camp, where the bulk of the story takes place. Throughout the book, she struggles with memory - which memories are real (the future or the now), remembering anything b/c of the trauma of the camp, futilely trying to use her future-memory to warn those around her, etc.

The story is chilling. And it is beautiful and sad. And it is an amazing combination of historical fiction and s/f.

Some of my favorite quotations:

"Passover isn't about eating, Hannah," her mother began at last, sighing and pushing her fingers through her silver-streaked hair. "You could have fooled me," Hannah muttered. (4)

But as the scissors snip-snapped through her hair and the razor shaved the rest, she realized with a sudden awful panic that she could no longer recall anything from the past. I cannot remember, she whispered to herself. I cannot remember. She's been shorn of memory as brutally as she'd been shorn of her hair, without permission, without reason...Gone, all gone, she thought again wildly, no longer even sure what was gone, what she was mourning. (94)

"We all have such stories. It is a brutal arithmetic. But I - I am alive. You are alive. As long as we breathe, we can see and hear. As long as we can remember, all those gone before are alive inside us." (113)

The days' routines were as before, the only change being the constant redness of the sky as trainloads of nameless zugangi were shipped along the rails of death. Still the camp seemed curiously lightened because of it, as if everyone knew that as long as others were processed, they would not be. A simple bit of mathematics, like subtraction, where one taken away at the top line becomes one added on to the bottom. The Devil's arithmetic." (146)

Cassandra Ramos says

My son came home last week and said “mom can you believe my language arts teacher is making us read a book this close to the end of the school year?” Being the book nerd I am I became excited and asked what’s the name of the book and he says “The Devils Arithmetic” well I had never heard of the book and decided to read up on it. After reading the synopsis I immediately put the book on hold to pick up the following day. I read it in one fell swoop! I cried like baby snot cried! I read everything my kids read, and I’m glad that my son had the chance to read this (or still reading). I think that all kids of appropriate age should read this book because it’s real, it’s what happened and children were involved. I have never understood the reasoning behind banned books... I get age appropriate, but books such as this one can teach them to appreciate the life that has been handed to them.

Ayanna Dukes says

So, during school (L.A) we're learning about World War II and the Holocaust, I've always wanted to learn more about both topics. My teacher suggested this book to me, and I'm happy that she did. I've never, so far, read a book like this in my life. First of all, this was the first Holocaust book I've read. I just love how this book starts and ends, sort of like a circular ending. Most books wont make me shed tears but this one did. I think it was amazing that Hannah the main character, got to go back in time to 1942! It was nice to see things from her perspective. This kept me at the edge of my seat, it was a little scary not knowing what was going to happen next. I really enjoyed this book, and I recommend it to anyone who is looking for a good Holocaust book.

Lisa Vegan says

This is a marvelous book for young adults, although I wouldn't recommend it as their first introduction to the holocaust because it portrays the atrocities committed in a starkly realistic way. And, unlike some young adult books that I enjoyed as young as nine or ten years old, I wouldn't give this to kids until they were at least 12.

It is a wonderful story and, because the main character, an American Jewish girl who's 12 years old, is from the present time (even though the book was written twenty years ago, it still has a sufficiently modern feel) readers can perhaps empathize with her and the experiences she has when she goes back in time to Poland during the Nazi holocaust. I thought Jane Yolen had a truly inspired way to tell this story. Even readers who do not normally enjoy history or historical fiction will probably appreciate this book because the time travel nature of the story allows a contemporary young person to truly experience events of the past. (I've always loved history and historical fiction, but I know that some young people are not so interested.)

The characters are likeable and believable and the ending is smart and heartwarming. All through the book there are hints about how the story will evolve and in a way it was predictable, but the details of the ending caught me by surprise, even though I was looking for the gist of what did happen.

It's a terrific family story and it could make for intimate discussions between young adults and their adult family members. I'm also strongly in favor of it being taught in schools as part of the curricula for holocaust studies and history lessons.

Skip says

Hannah and her family are celebrating Passover. When Hannah opens the door to look for Elijah, she is transported back in time to 1942 Poland, as the Nazi's are rounding up the Jews for the final solution. Chaya (Hannah) tries to warn her family and friends what is happening, but to no avail as history marches ahead anyway. This book is primarily aimed at younger readers. Yolen's afterword is a highlight.

Agn? says

The Devil's Arithmetic is a moving and heartbreaking young adult fantasy/historical fiction novella grounded in the real events that happened during the Holocaust. However, I found the first half of the book to be tortuously slow and boring.

Kim says

Summary: When Hannah opens the door during Passover Seder to symbolically welcome the prophet Elijah, she suddenly finds herself in the unfamiliar world of a Polish village in the 1940's. Hannah had always complained about listening to her relatives tell the same stories of the Holocaust over and over, but now she finds herself in a terrifying situation. The Nazi soldiers have come to take the villagers away, and Hannah can guess where they are going.

Response: I loved this book. Being Jewish, Passover is a huge holiday in my family. I can relate to Hannah. I remember thinking that Passover Seders were boring when I was younger. It wasn't until I was older that I learned to fully appreciate the holiday. This book transforms the reader into the Holocaust through the eyes of a child. I think this would be an excellent book to use in the classroom during the study of the Holocaust to show the students a different perspective.

Lars Guthrie says

Yolen employs a "Magic Tree House" trope to move her main character, Hannah, a bored American thirteen-year-old at her family's Seder dinner, through time, space and language, and it comes off as hokey. Once Hannah becomes Chaya, an orphan living in a Polish village in 1942, though, this tale grabs onto the reader and doesn't let go. Hannah opens the door of her family's apartment to welcome the prophet Elijah and is soon crammed into a crowded cattle car with other Jews on a train destined for the "final solution." Yolen makes such a narrative more than a recounting of horror and the inhumanity of humanity with strong characters and a strong story. By the time Hannah re-enters the present and pleasant Passover gathering with heightened respect and empathy for her Holocaust-surviving grandfather and aunt, I was willing to forgive the contrived device. After all, it's one that works for kids in any number of series. And in the end, it did so here. The novel prompts young readers swept up in Yolen's carefully researched tale to make the effort to remember what must never be forgotten.

Meaghan says

I wish I could say I liked this book. I thought I would. I know it's critically acclaimed and a well-known story. But it left me with a bad taste in my mouth.

The book is meant to educate young people about the Holocaust, but it had a lot of historical inaccuracies. The idyllic shtetl world at the beginning of Chaya's story would have been long gone by 1942 -- by that time, all the Jews left alive in Poland were in ghettos, in concentration camps or in hiding. Lublin, the place Chaya supposedly came from, was ghettoized and in early 1942, most of its Jewish population was deported to Belzec and killed.

The dialogue was overly didactic (a common flaw in historical novels, especially those for children) and too much was told rather than shown. Further, the camp confused me. Yolen says in the end that she created an amalgam fictional camp out of various aspects of real camps, but she used the trademark Auschwitz sign: "Arbeit Macht Frei." I was confused throughout the book: This is Auschwitz? But where are the selections, the band, Mengele? Did she do any research at all, I wondered. Yolen should have revealed her use of a made-up camp at the beginning, and she shouldn't have used the Auschwitz sign.

If you want to look for some better books on the Holocaust for children, try any of Uri Orlev's, or Jerry Spinelli's *Milkweed*, or Livia Bitton-Jackson's memoir *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, or...well, quite a few books are better than this one.

Lindsey says

Anyone and everyone should read this book! It's a very fast read because it was written for children but it tells a beautiful story and has a great twist in the end. *The Devil's Arithmetic* is about a young Jewish girl who doesn't quite understand her family's past. She finds Jewish holidays and celebrations to be boring and is unappreciative of the hardships Jews have faced. She is mysteriously transported to the past and ends up in a concentration camp. Here she suffers the hardships first hand and begins to understand and appreciate her family's history. Heads up, it's a tear-jerker!

Becky says

I wasn't really sure what to make of this book when I first saw it, but after having read it, I would say that I am glad that I did.

This is one of those books that really makes you look at things from a different perspective. I can relate to Hannah, because I remember being 13 and having little patience with traditions and customs, and just wanting to hang out with my friends.

But given the experience Hannah had, she was able to see things in a new way, and was granted a gift, even though it was at a great cost, to be able to know and really understand her family's past and how they became who they are. And because of this, she gains a newfound respect and admiration for them, and her own life,

that she might not have otherwise known.

This is the lesson that this book taught me. Yes, it was about the Holocaust and the epic tragedy that occurred, but I think it was more about understanding and respecting where you come from, and not letting trivial everyday teenage life get in the way of honoring your past.

SPOILERS BELOW

Ultimately, I gave this one 4 stars only because the book never really explained who/where *Chaya* was really.

With these types of books, where someone goes back in time into the body of another person, I always wonder where the person who is inhabited goes when the person who is inhabiting them is there.

Did *Chaya* die when she was ill, allowing Hannah to come back in order make her a hero to her Aunt? Or did *Chaya* sort of get shunted off to the side when Hannah took over, which means that *Chaya* had no choice in the sacrifice she made?

I hope the latter is not the case, although near the end it is mentioned that Hannah has 3 sets of memories -- of being in Lublin, of being with Gitl and Schmuel, and of her American family. It seems to me that Hannah should only have had 2 sets of memories if *Chaya* was not in there somewhere.

The last possibility is that *Chaya* was Hannah in a past life, whose life Hannah had a vision of (through *Chaya's* eyes, perhaps?) at just the right moment to attain the perspective she needed... Of the three, this is the most appealing to me, although some aspects of the story don't fit perfectly with this theory.

Overall, I am very glad that I read this book, and would highly recommend it.

Janette says

I usually read to avoid hearing about depressing subjects but I went ahead and read this one even though it was about a Jewish girl living during WW2.

It was a good book, and I got choked up in the end. Then I couldn't get to sleep at night because I was too busy pondering how civilized societies are capable of butchering millions of people. It seems so impossible, and yet it's happened more than once in history.

It makes you look at your friends and neighbors and wonder what sort of hearts of darkness might be there.

And it makes you wonder what might happen again in the future. What would I do if the government came for me or for my neighbors?

I know it's not the purpose of the book--but it did make me want to go out and buy a gun for the first time in my life. If the Jews had been armed, it would have been a different story.

Anyway, this was a good book and it made you think--although I go back and forth as to whether it should really be in the juvenile section. I'm not sure it's a book I'd choose for an eight year-old. I mean, if I had trouble sleeping after reading this book, it might be too much for a young child to handle. Parents should

probably read it before checking it out for their children.

Chris says

This semester I am requiring my students to read *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel*, a novel takes place in Poland during World War II. The good news is that my students love the book; in fact, several of them are reading ahead.

The shocking fact, the bad news, is what they don't know. It is not just knowledge of history that they lack; it is knowledge of basic geography.

God bless PowerPoint and blackboard.

To be fair, my students do ask intelligent questions, yet the lack of basic knowledge is shocking. At times, I feel like I am teaching a culture and history course in addition to a reading skills course.

Now, I don't think it is the students' fault. I think the fault lies with the schools as well as parents and special interest groups. Here's why.

There is a group called PABBIS (Parents against Bad Books in Schools). I disagree with them on so many different levels, but their website does have two good features. It actually quotes the material they find objectionable, and it has a complete list of banned and challenged books (as recent as 4-5 years ago).

The Devil's Arithmetic is on that list by the way.

Everything by Stephen King makes the list. Everything by Dahl, Blume, Block. There are a few *Black Stallion* books on the list as is *Black Beauty*, *Harry Potter*, *His Dark Materials*, *Three to Tango*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Lorax*, and Shakespeare.

In other words, pretty much anything good.

Lately, history and science text books have been subjected to strange changes (i.e. as in Texas) and warning labels (usually about evolution).

In terms banning and challenging books, I might under the idea if the book was being assigned at an inappropriate grade level, say *Beloved* to first graders. Why an exceptional first grader might not have a problem with such a book, there are several things wrong, in general, about such assignment, least of which is the subject matter. Yet, I have never heard of such an assignment. Age appropriateness isn't really the issue. It seems to rest on what might offend any group, anywhere.

Take, for instance, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. This book has been banned, challenged, and rejected by parents and text book committees because of the sex and tragedy of the story.

Raisin in the Sun has been banned and challenged because it's pornographic. (Can someone please, please show me where?).

I can certainly see why *The Devil's Arithmetic* is banned. It is the mention of a wedding.

Blatantly heterosexual.

Okay, it's most likely due to the violence (it's about the Holocaust) and the ending. *Romeo and Juliet* was dissed by a teacher who said it was a blatant endorsement of heterosexual love (so I guess teen suicide is okay).

BUT, Yolen's magnificent book is exactly the type of book that should be used in schools.

Let's face it, the wrong text book and/or the wrong teacher can make history very boring, and sometimes people just don't like learning about history for a variety of reasons. This is the reason why good historical fiction should be used in schools. A good historical novel can get a reader interested in a period, in an event, in a person. This true, to a degree, of such less accurate work than *The Devil's Arithmetic*. *300* caused some people to become interested in the Spartans, *Titanic* in the actual ship. In terms of books, vampire novels and historical fiction, such as *The Other Boleyn Girl* also cause readers to become interested in the actual events or myths that the novel is based on. Curiosity and a desire to learn are fueled by a variety of things; interest is one of them.

The Devil's Arithmetic is precisely the type of book that for young readers can help history seem more real and, perhaps, get a reader interested in history. Yolen does not talk down to her readers, her main character is sympathetic, an older sibling, and because Yolen doesn't pull her punches, it is a real history, not a feel good history. This makes the story far more compelling and interesting. The story is told actively and quickly. Words are not wasted. The reader learns but is not lectured to and screamed at.

Because of this reality and vividness, parents object to the story, and this raises the question of whether teachers and parents should sugarcoat history. It's true that are plenty of novels and movies that present history in a more flattering light (look at the perfect teeth, the clean bodies, the small pox vaccination scars). A reader can quite easily find it in any average romance novel. Such writing does serve a sense of purpose, escapism, and there is nothing wrong with that.

But that is not education.

Is this what parents want a school to be?

I hope not. I suppose it is easy for me to comment on appropriateness and the evil of banning because I don't have a child, and I was raised in a house where you were encouraged to read what you wanted. I see, however, the effects of banning and challenging which are a total lack of knowledge or, worse, a lack of interest about a subject because the subject has been taught in such a sterile environment, so devoid of any color or shading, where everything is the color and taste of sugar; where everyone in the world has always treated everyone with respect and love, where women always had the right to vote, and slavery only existed in North and South America, and was totally destroyed by the American Civil War.

Good literature, of which *The Devil's Arithmetic* is a prime example forces its readers to examine their own knowledge and lack of knowledge, forces readers to think about their own responses, notions, and stereotypes. Good literature teaches or enlightens the reader even if the reader already knows. It is a bond between writer, book, and reader that is no less real than those ties of family and society that provide the excuse for book banning.

Molly Grace says

This book is really good!! It's about a Jewish little girl transported to 1942 Poland and is captured by the Nazi's and brought to a concentration camp. This book gives us more information about what everyday life was like. I prefer that people read this book!!
