



The War Within: A Novel of the Civil War
by Carol Matas

All-of-a-Kind-Family Uptown by Sydney Taylor

Of Heroes, Hooks, and Heirlooms by Faye Silton

Pink Slippers, Bat Mitzvah Blues by Ferida Wolff

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

The books in this series (appropriate for girls ages 9-12) depict the lives of Jewish girls in four periods of American history: the 1860s, the 1910s, the 1950s, and the 1990s. Despite the differences in historical period, these girls struggle with similar questions: what it means to be Jewish in America, how to fit in with other people, and how to be proud of one's distinctiveness. In addition, they apply lessons from Jewish history to their own lives, asserting values of equality, dignity, and social justice. As they come of age as Jews, women, and Americans, these girls demonstrate that they have much to learn from their own heritage, as well as from others they encounter in the world around them, about being true to themselves.

TIPS FOR THE GIRLS' BOOK CLUB

Girls' book clubs provide wonderful opportunities for stimulating intergenerational reading and discussion. Most of all, they can be great fun for the girls and women who participate. In order to create an effective book club environment, we suggest the following:

- Keep it simple. Don't create too formal an atmosphere in the book club meetings and don't make the reading feel like homework.
- Encourage sharing of ideas and feelings among the girls and cross-generationally.
- Encourage creativity.
- Let the girls direct the discussion around the issues they find compelling.
- Bring the enclosed prepared questions, but be open to turns the conversation may take.

- Don't limit the conversation to the book assigned for that meeting; feel free to refer back to other books you have already read together and to make connections among the readings.
- Allow some time for socializing before and/or after the book discussion.
- Encourage regular attendance so that book club members grow comfortable together, creating a sense of intimacy and community.

THE WAR WITHIN: A NOVEL OF THE CIVIL WAR (2001)

BY CAROL MATAS

Hannah Green is a Jewish girl living in Mississippi during the Civil War. She feels loyal to the Confederacy, believes slavery is justifiable, and is upset when her sister falls in love with a Yankee soldier. But when General Grant issues General Order #11, expelling Jews from the territories under his command, Hannah and her family must leave their home. As they travel north with the Union army, Hannah begins to question where she belongs and what she believes.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In her diary, Hannah writes that the important characteristics of a Southern lady in 1862 are order, decorum, manners, and etiquette. What do you think are the most important characteristics of a woman today?
- Hannah treats Joanna's boyfriend coldly, because he is a Union soldier and therefore an enemy in her eyes. Her

mother, however, tells Hannah that they should be kind to Captain Mazur because he is an “Israelite” (Jewish). Do you think that all Jews should feel connected to one another? What other kinds of loyalty might get in the way of Jews taking care of one another? Do you ever feel a special connection to someone just because he/she is Jewish?

- Hannah’s family celebrates Jewish holidays at home, but they keep their Jewishness to themselves when they are with their Christian neighbors. Why do they do this? Do you think their neighbors would have treated them differently if they were more outspoken about being Jews?
- After General Grant’s General Order #11, Hannah is afraid that her friends will think of her differently, as an outsider. Do you ever feel different because you are Jewish? Is it good or bad to feel this way?
- Hannah’s family owns slaves, and at the beginning of the book, Hannah believes that slavery is acceptable. Why does she believe this? How do her beliefs change? What causes this change in her perspective? Have your opinions ever changed like this on an important issue?
- At the beginning of the book, Hannah is sure that she knows who is right and who is wrong: she believes the Confederate soldiers are good and the Yankees are bad. How does her sense of right and wrong change? Did this book challenge your belief in who are the “good guys” and who are the “bad guys” in the Civil War?
- Hannah’s father teaches her “to love God in our neighbor.” What does this mean? What is challenging about this religious principle?

ALL-OF-A-KIND-FAMILY UPTOWN (1958)

BY SYDNEY TAYLOR

This is the story of a Jewish family living in New York in the 1910s. The family's six children – five girls and a boy – get into amusing adventures and support one another through difficult times, such as their mother's illness and World War I.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- This book takes place almost 90 years ago. How are the lives of the "All-of-a-Kind Family" different from our lives today? How are they similar?
- Who is your favorite character in the book? Why?
- What happens when Henny borrows Ella's dress without her permission? How does she get caught? Have you ever done something like this?
- When Mama is sick, Ella is put in charge of her younger siblings. She says, "I guess this is what growing up really means... Standing on your own two feet and being your own mountain." What do you think she means by this? Have you ever had to be your own mountain? If so, describe the experience.
- What Jewish holidays does the family celebrate and how do they celebrate them? Do you celebrate Shabbat (the Sabbath) or any of these holidays with your family? If so, how? Are your celebrations different from the ones in the book?
- Why does Jules volunteer to be a soldier? Do you agree with his decision? Would you have volunteered?
- What is the impact of the war on the characters' lives?

What kinds of things do they do to help with the war effort? How would you have helped?

- The Healy family – who live downstairs – are not Jewish. What do the Healys learn from their upstairs neighbors? What does the “All-of-a-Kind Family” learn from the Healys? Do you have neighbors of a different religion or cultural background? Have you shared any customs with them?

OF HEROES, HOOKS, AND HEIRLOOMS (1997)

BY FAYE SILTON

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, Mia is the only child of parents who survived the Holocaust. As part of a school project, she is asked to bring in family photographs and a family heirloom. But her parents escaped from Europe and were unable to bring any heirlooms with them. Mia struggles to find a way to talk to her parents about their past and to represent her family's heritage in her class project.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- When does this story take place? What do you know about the terrible events that Mia's parents experienced in Europe?
- Why does Mia want to be a hero? What do you think it means to be a hero? Do you think Mia becomes a hero by the end of the book?
- Why don't Mia's parents talk about their past? Why does their silence change? What does Mia learn about her family by the end of the book?
- Why is Mia drawn to The Noble Needle yarn shop? What does she like about crocheting? Do you have any hobbies that you love? What about your hobby do you enjoy?
- Mia's teacher says that "photos are mirrors with memories." What does she mean by this? Do you have any old family photographs? What do they reveal about your family? Are there things you would like to have photos of but don't?
- How are Mia's family and home different from the

families and homes of other people in her class? How do these differences make her feel? How do her friends respond when they come over for the crocheting class?

- What is an heirloom? Does Mia's project change your idea of what an heirloom is? Does your family have any heirlooms?

SUGGESTION FOR GROUP ACTIVITY

Have each girl and the woman who accompanies her to the book group choose an old photograph to bring in. Together, analyze the photos according to the questions for "photoanalysis" given in the book.

PINK SLIPPERS, BAT MITZVAH BLUES (1989)

BY FERIDA WOLFF

After Alyssa's Bat Mitzvah is over, she can focus on her passion: ballet. She looks forward to performing in the *Nutcracker* and tells the Rabbi that she cannot attend Confirmation classes because they interfere with her ballet practice. But when her best friend, Ellen, gets sick and needs her help, Alyssa has to make some difficult decisions about her priorities.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Alyssa loves to dance more than anything else, and she is willing to sacrifice other activities – like Confirmation class – so that she can focus exclusively on ballet. Do you have any interests that you love in this way? What kinds of sacrifices have you had to make to pursue your interests?
- Alyssa feels torn when she has to choose between being in the *Nutcracker* ballet and visiting her sick friend. How does she make her decision? What would you choose? Have you ever been faced with a difficult choice like this?
- Alyssa breaks the hospital rules in order to visit Ellen. Do you think this was the right thing to do? Why or why not?
- Rabbi Pearlman asks the Confirmation class, "Are you less of a Jew if you follow only those teachings that fit in with your personal needs?" How would you answer this question?
- Alyssa says, "I felt Jewish inside, but I still didn't know how much had to show on the outside." What does she mean? Can you relate to this feeling?

- Why does listening to her Bat Mitzvah tape make Ellen cry?
- At the end of the book, Alyssa dances for the youth service at her synagogue and realizes that dancing and Judaism don't need to be competing interests. What do you think of this ending?

The Jewish Women's Archive is a national non-profit organization dedicated to uncovering, chronicling and transmitting the rich historical legacy of American Jewish women. Founded in Boston, Massachusetts in 1995, JWA was one of the first Jewish organizations to stake a claim on the new frontier of the internet, and continues to innovate in its use of the virtual world for academic, cultural, archival and educational purposes. JWA's award-winning website has the most extensive collection of material on American Jewish women on the web. JWA has become a leading advocate of and educational resource for Jewish women's history.

For more information, visit the Jewish Women's Archive website at jwa.org.

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*Originally created as part of the
Celebration of 350 Years of
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138 Harvard Street • Brookline, MA 02446
jwa.org • 617.232.2258