

Yellow Star Literature Guide



Yellow Star by Jennifer Roy is a historical novel set in Poland during World War II, following the life of a young Jewish girl named Syvia who survives the Holocaust in the Łódź Ghetto. The book is based on the author's own family history, with Syvia's story offering a powerful, first-hand account of the harrowing experiences Jewish children faced during the Nazi occupation. Written in verse, the novel conveys the emotional and physical struggles of Syvia and her family, as they endure starvation, the constant threat of death, and the horrors of being forced to wear the yellow star of the Jews. Despite the tragic events surrounding her, Syvia's determination to survive shines through, providing readers with a poignant reminder of the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable adversity.

Grade Levels: 5-9

Essential Question:

How does resilience, hope, and identity endure in the face of oppression and adversity?

Objectives:

- Students will learn about individual stories in the context of the events of the Holocaust.
- Students will widen their perspective of the events of the Holocaust by learning about ghettos and ghettoization.
- Students will understand the Holocaust was a crime perpetrated on individuals by individuals, and the stories are family history for the victims.

In this literature guide, you will find:

- Introduction
- Reading Questions
- Concluding Activity

Introduction

Before engaging in the book study on *Yellow Star*, teachers will want to set the historical context of the Holocaust, as defined by [USHMM](#):

The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews by the Nazi German regime and its allies and collaborators. The Holocaust was an evolving process that took place throughout Europe between 1933 and 1945.

One option for setting historical context includes showing the following video clip of an interview with Holocaust survivor Sylvia Rozines, who describes her experiences in Łódź Ghetto:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_dtkuC8668&list=PLWQC3P4psZP5XvJGLpwgOKF4dNUZAbtH1&index=4

Reading Questions:

Below are reading comprehension questions for students by book part.

Part One:

1. On page 3, the author uses figurative language when she says, “The worry of grown-ups fills the air.” What do you think the author meant by this statement?
2. On page 4, we begin to sense Sylvia’s personality through the author’s description in the section “Questions.” How would you describe Sylvia’s personality based on what you know?
3. On page 6, Sylvia and her family have tried to escape to Warsaw but eventually return to Łódź. She says, “The trip back home seems even colder.” Why does the return trip feel colder than before?
4. In the section titled “The Rest of Poland,” how is antisemitism shown?
5. Pages 11 and 12 show a contrast in Mother’s and Papa’s reactions to the new living quarters in the ghetto. How does each parent feel about the new place, and what does that show about each of their personalities?
 - a. Mother
 - b. Papa
6. In the section titled “Colors of the Ghetto” (p. 21), Sylvia lists the colors around her.
 - a. What does the use of the color brown suggest about life in the ghetto?
 - b. Who wears the yellow stars?

- c. Whose blood is in a puddle?
- d. What does the gray color of Papa's face indicate?
- 7. On page 26, how does Dora begin teaching Sylvia her letters?
- 8. On pages 33-34, Sylvia explains the food ration that people get each day. What is included in that ration? Do you think that it is enough food to sustain life? (Note: That is the ONLY food provided in the ghetto).

Part Two:

1. In the introduction to Part Two, the author describes the most common ways Jews were dying in the ghetto. Please list those.
2. In the section titled "Live for Today" (p. 38), describe how life goes on in the ghetto despite the poor conditions.
3. On pages 41-42, how does Sylvia describe herself when her parents discuss whether or not she should stay inside all day while they are out working?
4. At the end of Part One, Dora picks on Sylvia but by the middle of Part Two she is very protective of Sylvia. What do you think accounts for this change in Dora?
5. Describe Sylvia's day as she recollects it in "My Day" and "Goodbye Dust!" on pages 43 and 44.
6. In the section titled "Love," Sylvia says about her mother, "Her love fills my plate" (p. 49). What does she mean by this statement?
7. How does "winter erase whole families" (p. 51) in the ghetto?

Parts Three and Four:

1. Contrast how Dora talks to Sylvia on page 36 and how she talks with Sylvia on page 89. How does Dora's tone change? Why do you suppose there is a change in her tone?
2. Describe how the author seems to make time slow down from pages 73-78. Why is it important for time to seem slower in this section?
3. What are the preparations Sylvia's father had to make ahead of time to make her hiding possible?
4. Part Four covers two years in Sylvia's life in only four pages.
 - a. Why or how did the author speed up time for this section?
 - b. Why is the passage of so much time in so little space fitting?

Part Five up to "Summer 1944":

1. In the section titled "Another Question" (pg. 103), Sylvia questions whether the rescuers will be willing to rescue Jews. What reason would Sylvia have to question the motives of the rescuers?
2. Sylvia's family has been summoned for deportation. On page 120, she has a bad dream about being unable to save a ship in a storm. Interpret the meaning of her dream in the context of her family's deportation.
3. Upon entering the building where the children will be hidden, Papa knew something about "the list" (pg. 130). What did Papa know about "the list"?

4. In the section titled "Special Gifts" (pg. 145), describe the gifts Mother, Dora, and Papa bring to Sylvia.
5. On page 158, Sylvia describes the other children in the cellar with her along with her own role there. Provide text details about each.
 - a. The Chef
 - b. Nervous Hands
 - c. Mouse/Nobody Special

Part Five: Late Fall-Winter 1944

1. Why do you think Sylvia describes the pails of coal in such detail, and what might they symbolize in the context of survival?
2. What does the sight of the blue sky mean to Sylvia after so much time in hiding, and how does it affect her emotionally?
3. How does the moment of leaving the cellar reflect a shift in the story's tone, and what fears still linger for Sylvia and her family?
4. Why is the gift of a pear such a powerful and emotional moment for Sylvia, and what does it show about human kindness?
5. What might the image of "heavy boots" represent in this scene, and how does it impact the sense of danger?
6. How does Sylvia react when they are caught, and what does her reaction tell us about her resilience or fear?
7. What emotions are portrayed during the capture, and how does this moment highlight the risk the family took to survive?
8. What is the significance of the people forming a circle, and how does it reflect the themes of community or vulnerability?
9. Why is this moment so significant in Sylvia's memory, and how does the author use it to convey the gravity of their situation?
10. How does going upstairs represent both physical and emotional change for Sylvia after hiding?
11. How does the approach of winter create new challenges for the survivors, and what does it say about their ongoing struggle?
12. What does Sylvia's restless sleep suggest about her state of mind, and how does it reflect the trauma she has endured?

Part Five: Winter 1945

1. How does hearing the soldier's story change Sylvia's understanding of what is happening outside the ghetto?
2. What might the two large holes symbolize, and how do they affect the mood of this part of the story?
3. Why is "double-checking" important in this moment, and what does it reveal about how cautious people had to be?
4. How does the sound of bombs impact Sylvia, and how does the author use this scene to show the chaos of war?

5. What emotions does Sylvia express when she feels trapped, and how does this relate to the overall theme of fear and hope?
6. Why is the key an important symbol in this part of the story, and what does it represent for Sylvia and her family?
7. What does the phrase "running in circles" suggest about the characters' situation or state of mind during this time?
8. Why is crossing the street such a big moment for Sylvia, and what risks are involved?
9. How does the discovery of the icebox highlight both the struggles and small victories of survival?
10. What does Sylvia learn about bravery in this section, and how is her idea of courage different from a typical hero story?
11. What does "walking out" symbolize for Sylvia and the others, and how is this moment different from how they entered the ghetto?
12. Why is it meaningful for Sylvia to realize there are other survivors, and how does this affect her understanding of identity?
13. What do the characters hope to achieve by sending a message to above, and how does this act connect to their faith or desperation?
14. What kind of "miracle" does Sylvia witness, and how does it affect her view of the world after so much suffering?
15. How is the moment of liberation described, and why is it both joyful and confusing for Sylvia?
16. Why is saying "hello" to the world outside the ghetto so emotional, and what does it reveal about what Sylvia has lost and gained?
17. Why are the gifts for the children so significant, and how do they represent more than just material items?
18. How does Sylvia react to her new freedom, and what challenges come with it?
19. Why might Sylvia or others call her survival "an amazing story," and how does she seem to feel about telling it?
20. How does the bad news impact Sylvia and her family, and what does this moment say about the lasting effects of the Holocaust?
21. What is "shattered" in this section—physically or emotionally—and how is it described?
22. How is "stepping out" into the world symbolic for Sylvia, and what does it suggest about her future?
23. Why is the date January 19, 1945 so important to Sylvia, and how does marking it help us understand the historical and personal significance of liberation?

The book ends with a powerful author's note and information about Sylvia's real-life journey. How does learning this is a true story change your perspective on what you've read?

Concluding Activity: Create a collage

Instructions: Complete each task step-by-step to learn more about the role of ghettos during the Holocaust and how individuals were affected by ghettoization.

Step 1: Read the article on "[The Ghettos](#)" from Echoes and Reflections and answer the following questions:

1. What were the primary reasons for the establishment of ghettos during the Holocaust?
2. How did conditions in the ghettos contribute to the high death toll among Jewish populations?
3. What was the role of the *Judenraete* in the ghettos, and what moral dilemmas did they face?
4. How did the Nazi invasion of Poland impact both Polish and Jewish populations?
5. What early plans did the Nazis consider for removing Jews before implementing the Final Solution?
6. How did Jewish families and communities adapt to the extreme hardships of ghetto life?
7. In what ways did Jews attempt to maintain cultural and educational activities within the ghettos?
8. What factors influenced the conditions in different ghettos, and how did these conditions vary?

Step 2: Define ghetto as it relates to the Holocaust.

Step 3: Analyze the animated map: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ybGWyKFpA>

1. What is one takeaway from viewing the animated map?

Step 4: View a selection of the survivor biographies and testimonies provided below and answer the accompanying questions.

- George Shainfarber
 - Biography: <https://www.holocaustmemoryproject.com/stories/george-szjya-shainfarber?rq=George%20Shainfarber>
 - Images: <https://64.media.tumblr.com/f0f3d18657be5a6805dfb6bf76662669/d4af25a4febb6986-ac/s1280x1920/6a6543d05f296892a37cb586b89120738fd89b1c.jpg>
 - Testimony:
 - Clip #1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1veeOc4tkk>
 - Clip #2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5RIhxx2Q14&t=1s>

- Questions:
 1. Describe how you think George felt while sharing this testimony.
 2. What information about survival and the ghetto experience can we learn from the collage?
 3. What do these testimony clips tell us about life in the ghetto?
 4. Describe your thoughts/feelings about these two pieces of testimony.
- Abraham Miles
 - Images and biography:

<https://hmrpjmm.tumblr.com/post/615397286812467200/abraham-miles-lodz-poland-more-my-father>
 - Question:
 1. How does this provide an additional piece of information about survival and life in the ghettos beyond the things we learned from George Shainfarber?
- Additional optional testimony
 - Joseph Morton testimony clip describing confinement, starvation, and fear in the ghetto: www.youtube.com/watch?v=blrSsNF6g6o.
 - Ellis Lewin testimony clip describing deportation to the Lodz Ghetto: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eh-KzDBjZbc&t=71s

Step 5: Design and construct your collage of life in a ghetto during the Holocaust.

- Use this link to the USHMM Collections <https://www.ushmm.org/> to search and locate images, photos of artifacts, or text to show what life was like in the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Europe. Use your collage to tell a story about the ghettos. You may choose to focus only on Łódź Ghetto or widen your search to ghettos in Nazi-occupied countries in general.
- Create the collage on paper or digitally.

Step 6: Write a concluding paragraph to demonstrate your learning about the purpose of ghettos and what life was like for Jews while imprisoned. Your paragraph should be 5-7 sentences in length. Reflect on the following questions:

- How did the Nazis use the system of ghettos to concentrate and exploit the Jews of Europe?
- What was life like for Jews while they were in ghettos?