The War Within

Study Guide

I. Introduction

This study guide aims to provide material to help in the preparation of a lesson, unit, or book-club discussion about the novel *The War Within by* Carol Matas. Studying this novel continues the exploration of the Jewish experience in America.

The War Within is a work of historical fiction about the Civil War, exploring some of the tensions and conflicting values associated with the fighting. The story is told from the perspective of Hannah Green, a Jewish girl living in the South, as it is recorded in her diary. The novel traces the tumultuous events in the small town of Holly Springs over the course of ten days at the end of 1862. A Union order forces all Jews to evacuate their homes and as a result of the arduous journey, Hannah is forced to reconsider her firmly held beliefs regarding justice and injustice and her notions of power and of loyalty. Throughout the course of the novel, Hannah learns that there are no absolute truths when it comes to war and further realizes the dangers of generalizations when it comes to understanding others. In a country divided, Hannah's journey allows for newfound understanding of the Jewish teaching, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

To help plan for the study of the novel, this guide offers:

• Questions for study and discussion

• Passages for close analysis

• Lesson ideas

• Writings activities

• Projects

Combine any components of the guide to help shape your lessons on the novel. You may also want to use the ideas as a means of offering enrichment and extra credit to students who wish to read the novel.

II. Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Where and when does the novel take place? What is the historical backdrop for the novel?

2. Who is fighting whom? What are the issues at stake and with whom does Hannah side?

3. For what reasons are the Green family told that they must leave Holly Springs? (See pages 13 and 148.)

4. Create a character profile of Hannah: Who are the people that comprise her community? What are her interests and what are her primary concerns at the start of the novel?

5. Who is Captain Mazer and why does Hannah have such a negative attitude towards him? How does her attitude change throughout the course of the novel, particularly after her illness?

6. What is the significance of Moses' name? What are the Biblical resonances of his circumstances and how does he act as a teacher to Hannah? (See pages 103-106.)

7. What, according to Joanna, was the turning point for her in her views on the war? (See pages 64 and 65, and see also the end of the novel.) On what grounds does she challenge Hannah's assertions that, "All their boys are evil?"

8. What happens when the Confederate soldiers return to Holly Springs? What did Hannah expect would happen and why is she so distressed by the actual turn of events? Moreover, how does their behavior challenge her allegiance to the Confederate soldiers?

9. Why is The Catechism for Jewish Children of such importance to Hannah? What lessons does she extract from the text and how do these ideas relate to the unfolding of events?

10. What are Hannah's concerns about returning to Holly Springs? How are her father's words (page 146) both a comfort and a challenge to her?

III. Passages for Close Analysis

1. Page 2-3

"Recently my friend Eugenia had pointed out to me that I was far too familiar with our slaves and I had resolved to change. I turned away to look for my younger brother, feeling both confused and a little ashamed by my sternness with Jule. Eugenia was right, of course, but then why did I feel so uncomfortable?"

What is Jule's relationship to the Green family? How does the opening scene inform us about this relationship and Hannah, in particular? Why do you think she feels uncomfortable? How does this passage compare to the conversation with Jule at the end of the novel?

2. Page 30

"'Do you think the title word pride refers to Mr. Darcy or to Miss Bennet?'

'I must ask what you think,' she answered.

'I admit to being confused by the issue…On the surface it seems that the pride is all on Mr. Darcy's part, but as the book progresses one cannot but wonder if Miss Bennet is not stubborn and prideful herself. She cannot see his excellent qualities; she only sees what appearances suggest.'"

What is the significance of this inclusion of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, particularly as it pertains to the characterization of Miss Bennet? How does this passage relate to the characterization of Hannah herself?

3. Page 52

"Again that little voice appeared and gave me such an uncomfortable feeling. Was that voice telling me I had done wrong by Joanna? But it was for the South! Wasn't that more important even than family? Especially if the family was on the wrong path, like Joanna was? And yet, if I had spoken up and the Federals had been ready, maybe our house would not be on the verge of being destroyed."

What are the conflicting values that Hannah articulates? In your opinion, does allegiance to a country supercede allegiance to one's family?

How do you express your own allegiances? Do you identify yourself as an American Jew or as a Jewish American?

4. Page 123

"'And here let me tell you what I think is the most important command from God: Love thy neighbor as thyself. I am God. And for me,' Mr. Adler explained, 'for me, the best of us, the love we have in us, that is God. Wherever there is love, there is God.'

Everyone at the table was silent. I knew that the words he had just spoken were true... And yet, if that was the case, why couldn't I just know what the truth was about the war? Why wasn't it as clear?"

What about Mr. Adler's words are so influential to reshaping Hannah's worldview? What is the implication of his statement as it relates to how people should treat one another? How does the war complicate this command?

IV. Lesson Plans

1. One of the primary assertions of the novel is that there is no hierarchy of humanity. (i.e. no person is superior or inferior to another). Moreover, Moses challenges Hannah to reflect upon Jewish history to examine the parallels between Jewish slavery in Egypt and African American slavery in the United States.

Ask students to read through the first 4 chapters of Shemot (Exodus) and have them write a summary of the events of those chapters. Afterwards, examine historical texts or history books and do the same for U.S. slavery.

What are the similarities between these two experiences? What then, according to Moses, is the irony of Hannah owning slaves?

What are the students' reactions to both experiences and how do they think their reactions are shaped by their place as observers in this historical drama and product of events and changes of the 20th century?

You may also choose to introduce some spirituals to your students at this point, such as "Go Down Moses" or "My Army Cross Over" and ask them why they think these spirituals rely so heavily upon images of the exodus from Egypt.

2. Throughout the novel, Hannah is forced to re-examine and re-evaluate her beliefs about right and wrong. Previously, she possessed a very clear sense of these issues and perceived right and wrong as divided along army lines. The author uses a number of literary techniques to point towards the idea that truth is subjective. That is to say, that truth is not absolute but rather shaped by an individual's ideas and experiences.

Using the songs of the Confederate and Union soldiers, pages 40 and 109 respectively, engage in a discussion/writing activity about how Hannah's idea of "right" and "wrong" evolved in the course of the novel.

Make a list of the themes and images that arise from each song. What is the purpose of the songs; what feelings are they supposed to inspire? According to the songs, for what are these men fighting? What are the similarities and differences you perceive between the two?

Do both sides think they are "right?" If so, how can that be?

V. Writing Activities

1. Write a human-interest article about the plight of the Jews in Holly Spring. Include a brief history of events and comments from the key players (a Union general, Hannah's mother, citizens of Holly Springs, etc.). Provide answers to the following questions: Why was the order issued in the first place? To where are the families supposed to go? What

was the reaction of the townspeople? Is there a sense that this is temporary or permanent? If possible, include text from the actual order found on page 148.

2. Write a diary entry for January 3, 1863 as if you were Hannah. Describe your journey back to Holly Springs and your first impressions upon your return. Does the town look different? What happened to your home? How did Eugenia and Mary treat you? How did the lessons you learned over the past ten days affect your interactions with your friends and the townspeople, in general?

3. Personal journal exercise: Ask students to reflect upon a time in which they had to reconsider previously held ideas about right and wrong.

What were your original beliefs? Who were the people or what were the events that caused you to reconsider? What were the difficulties you confronted (internal and/or external factors) in trying to look at something differently?

VI. Projects

1. Use the novel as a jumping off point to inspire student activism:

Engage the students in a discussion about the meaning of slavery. Generate a list of characteristics or images associated with slavery. Using this list, create a definition of slavery. According to the class' definition, does slavery, in any manifestation, exist today?

Ask students to identify a situation where they perceive a kind of enslavement or injustice; have them research this issue (online, from newspaper articles, or in discussions with friends and family members). Afterwards, students should compose a letter to their political representatives or U.S. ambassador to the particular country outlining their position and then present their findings to the rest of the class.

2. Compare the Hebrew words of Adon Olam (page 131) with the words of the English hymn (page 132).

What is the significance of their proximity in the text?

What are the similarities in language and theme?

As a result, what are the implications about prayer and moreover, in what ways can prayer serve as a unifying force?

Ask students to compose or illustrate their own prayers – giving thanks or seeking help/guidance – and compile their work into a class siddur.

3. Mr. Adler shares what he thinks is the most important commandment with the Greens, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." This biblical teaching has been used as the basis for empathy and understanding throughout generations. A notable example in the last century

is the relationship between Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, Rabbi Heschel was an outspoken supporter of Mr. King, marching alongside him in Selma, Alabama. He believed that it was an obligation for individuals and, even more so, for religion to speak to issues of injustice.

Read the following excerpt from Heschel as a class:

"We have forgotten the meaning of being human and the deep responsibility involved in just being alive. Shakespeare's Hamlet said: 'To be or not to be, that is the question.' But that is no problem. We all want to be. The real problem, biblically speaking, is how to be and how not to be; that is our challenge, and it is what makes the difference between the human and the animal. The animal also wants to be. For us, it is the problem of how to be and how not to be, on the levels of existence. Now, what is the meaning of God? The meaning of God is precisely the challenge of 'how to be.'"

Excerpt from Union Seminary Quarterly Review, January 1966

Accord to this text, what do you think Heschel sees as the real challenge of being human?

What do the students think about what it means "to be?" How does "Love thy neighbor as thyself" fit into the discussion and how does this principle translate into everyday interactions? How does the article about the Freedom Rides featured in the Adar One 5763 (February 2003) issue of BabagaNewz (http://www.babaganewz.com/teachers/archive/article.cfm?id=189) reflect Heschel's philosophy?