A Pickpocket's Tale

By Karen Schwabach

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 *A Pickpocket's Tale* by Karen Schwabach.

This novel shares the story of Molly, a ten-year old orphan living in the London slums in the 1730s. Following her mother's death, Molly picks pockets in order to survive. She is able to get by until she is eventually caught and sentenced to indentured servitude in America. Upon arrival in America, Molly is sold to a Jewish family in New York, and despite their kindness, Molly is determined to return to London. Yet, over the course of the novel, Molly learns a tremendous amount about belonging, trust, Judaism, and helping others, and through her adventures finds herself a new home and a new sense of self.

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

II. Questions for Study and Discussion
III. Passages for Close Analysis
IV. Lesson Ideas
V. Writing Activities
VI. Projects

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

II. Questions for Study and Discussion

1. During what time period does the novel take place? What was happening in America during the period that relates to Molly's story?

2. What do you know about Molly's experiences in London? What was Molly's life like before arriving in America?

3. What information are we given about Molly's mother? How would you describe Molly's relationship with her?

4. The loss of her mother is a critical moment in Molly's life. What changed for her following her mother's death? What do we learn about how Molly deals with and feels about her mother's passing?

5. Molly has strong feelings about being sent to America. What are her concerns? What does she expect to happen once she arrives?

6. Upon her arrival in New York, Molly refuses to part with her worn stockings. Why won't Molly part with them? What do they represent for her?

7. Based on the author's descriptions, what do you imagine life was like in New York at the time? What did it look like? Who lived there? What do we know about the community?

8. What was life like for Jews living in New York during that time? What do we know about their community, practices, and how they interacted with others?

9. What information do we have about Molly's Jewish past? What new things is she exposed to and does she learn through her time with the Bells?

10. What is Molly's connection to her Judaism? How does it change over the course of the novel?

11. In addition to learning about Judaism, Molly learns many other new things upon her arrival in New York and through her time with the Bells. What new things did Molly learn? What changes did Molly have to make in her behavior? Attitude? Beliefs?

12. How does Arabella serve as a role model for Molly? How does David? How do the other Bells?

13. Trust is a central theme throughout the novel. How does Molly become increasingly trusting throughout the novel? What precipitates these changes?

14. In what ways does Molly's attitude towards the Bells change over the course of the novel? How does her perspective differ at the end of the novel than her perspective upon her arrival in New York? What factors contributed to her change of heart?

15. A theme of the novel is *kol yisrael areivim zeh bazeh*, all of Israel is responsible for each other. In what ways does this principle surface throughout the novel? Why do you think this theme is so central?

16. In what ways do Molly's attitudes toward America change over the course of the novel? What helps to facilitate this change?

III. Passages for Close Analysis

1. Page 40

"People generally, she had found, wanted what they could get out of you and would give nothing they didn't have to. Molly was the same way herself."

- How do Molly's experiences thus far support this claim?
- How does this sentiment inform Molly's understanding of people throughout the novel?
- In what ways does this belief change? What experiences support these changes?

2. Page 85

"'Are you Jewish, Arabella?'

Arabella let our a chuckle and propped herself up on her elbows. 'For Pete's sake, child. Do I look Jewish?'

'I don't know. Why do you live with the Bells, then?'

'Because they own me,' said Arabella. She lay back down.

'Like me, you mean?'

'No, not like you. For life. I'm a slave. And a very tired one. Now be quiet.'

Molly hadn't known it was possible to be a slave for life. 'What did they snabble you for?' she asked. And then, when Arabella didn't answer, she added, 'Arrest you for, I mean.'

'For being born with black skin,' said Arabella."

- Why did Molly think Arabella might be Jewish?
- In what ways is Molly's position with the Bells similar to and different from Arabella's?
- What might Molly have been thinking after hearing Arabella's response? What does she learn from this exchange? In what ways does this conversation influence Molly's relationship to Arabella and inform Molly's development?
- What did it mean to have "black skin" during this period in American history?
- What can we learn from this excerpt about life in New York during this time?

3. Page 126

"'Things are pretty tough over there. So why would you want to go back? Do you have family?'

Molly felt tears well in her eyes, and she turned her head angrily. 'No,' she said.

'Then why?'

She wasn't very good at answering questions like this. Because, she thought, my whole life hurts. I feel broken into a million pieces, and I just want to find whatever pieces I can.

'Because London is where I was born,' she said. New York was just…a place far from London. A nowhere place. A place on the edge of real.

He was still looking at her thoughtfully, so she added, 'It's where I belong.'

David shrugged. 'If you say so. I don't see why you can't belong here.'"

- Why does Molly begin to cry in this scene?
- What was Molly thinking about during this conversation? What didn't she tell David? Why?
- Why might Molly have felt, "broken in a million pieces?" Why might she want to find whatever pieces she could?
- In this excerpt, Molly argues that there is a connection between where a person is born and where he/she belongs. In what ways is this true? In what ways is it not true?
- How does Molly's attitude about belonging change throughout the novel? What supports these changes in Molly?

4. Page 198

"She was going to stay with the Bells, here in this little brick house on Mill Street near the synagogue. Until she reached the age of twenty-one, as her indenture said. She tried to feel disappointed, but instead she felt as if a great weight had lifted from her shoulders.

This was what she wanted. Maybe she'd wanted it for a long time, at least with part of her mind—the part that wasn't figuring out how to make a key and how to pick a lock. Long ago she belonged to Mama, and now she belonged here. Belonging to people was just the way things were."

- Why did Molly decide to stay with the Bells? What changed for her over the course of the novel?
- Why might Molly have "tried to feel disappointed?"
- In what ways might this realization have felt like a "great weight lifted" for Molly?
- What evidence throughout the story do we have that Molly wanted to stay in New York with the Bells with "part of her mind" prior to this point? What does it mean to want something with part of your mind?
- The theme of belonging recurs throughout the story. In what ways does Molly's understanding of belonging evolve over the course of the story and through her experiences in New York?

5. Page 212

"It occurred to Molly that she was actually freer than she had been before she belonged to the Bells."

- In what ways was Molly free in London? In what ways was she not free?
- In what ways was Molly free in New York? In what ways was she not free?
- How is freedom understood in this excerpt? What characterizes freedom?

- What experiences from your own life reflect a similar sentiment, that of being free despite some limitations on your freedom?
- What other characters and/or events deal with the question of slavery in the novel? How is freedom understood in these contexts?

6. Page 213

"Maybe you had to be a pickpocket to understand how something could be against the law and still be a mitzvah."

- This is one of the last lines of the novel. In what ways does this excerpt symbolize Molly's growth over the course of the novel?
- How does Molly begin to incorporate her past into her new life according to this excerpt?
- Molly learns a tremendous amount about mitzvot through her time with the Bells. How does Molly understand what a mitzvah is? In what ways does she feel she has performed a mitzvah?

IV. Lesson Ideas

1. Compare Molly's immigration experience to the experiences of immigrants to America at other points in history. In what ways was Molly's experience unique? In what ways was it similar to experiences of other immigrants throughout history? Some excellent resources include the Tenement Museum's online documents, *American Mosaic: The Immigrant Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It* by Joan Morrison and Charlotte Fox Zabusky and *New Kids on the Block.Oral Histories of Immigrant Teens* by Janet Bode.

2. Based on evidence provided in the story, consider what daily life might have been like for the following characters: Molly, Mrs. Bell, Arabella, and Mr. Bell. Divide students into groups, and have each group create a "day in the life" poster that outlines the character's schedule and responsibilities and includes some reflections, from the character's perspective, about their daily routine. Once each group has completed their poster, they should share their work and consider the following: What is similar in the four accounts? What is different? What accounts for the similarities? What accounts for the differences? How does this exercise inform our understanding of the period? What else might we want to learn?

3. Compile a list of what students know about the time period based on the novel. Then, have students read the Jews in America Supplement: Our Colonial Life available at BabagaNewz.com. What can they add to their list based on what they read? What might have been different about life in 1776 than in 1730?

4. Throughout the novel, Molly speaks Flash-cant, a dialect spoken in the London slums during that time. Consider the following questions: How does dialect help your

understanding of Molly? How does it hinder it? What, if anything, does dialect reveal about Molly? What does it reveal about the characters who do not speak it? Then, have your students experiment using dialect by writing a short piece about a character. They can choose to write about Molly or any character they would like, either from this novel, a different novel or their imagination. Then, have the students read each other's work, and discuss: How does the use of dialect help shape the character? How does it serve the author to write using dialect? What are the challenges?

2. This is an excellent opportunity to discuss issues of slavery and freedom. Begin by examining Biblical texts on this issue, and then expand the study to include modern commentaries, stories, and editorials on slavery.

V. Writing Activities

1. Have your students consider what might happen next in Molly's life, following the end of the novel. Ask them to write the next chapter in the story: What do you think will happen to Molly after the end of the novel? How will she explain her actions? How will the Bells respond?

2. Create a class diary. Giving different students or groups of students part of Molly's life to consider, ask each student or group to write a diary entry or several entries in which they reflect on Molly's experiences, feelings, and thoughts from her perspective. Then, compile the entries into a single diary for students to read. Alternatively, have each group be responsible for creating the diary of a different character in the story, and ask each group to write several entries from that character's perspective. Then, compile the diaries and have students read each other's work.

3. Have students choose one of the following characters to write about: Hesper, Christy, or Mrs. Wilkes. Ask the students to write a short story about what might have happened to these characters from where the author's telling of their stories ends.

4. Ask your students to imagine that they are Molly and reflect on what they've learned over the course of the novel. Choose a few central lessons to discuss in greater depth, and a write a paragraph about each—how you learned this particular lesson, why it's important to you, and why others should learn it as well.

5. Ask your students to write an article for a Jewish newspaper during that time period. They can choose any event they wish, and should write about the occurrence as it relates to the Jewish community at large, including a description of the event, the community's response, and an editorial regarding how it was handled and addressed.

VI. Projects

1. There are three waves of immigration to the United States: 1600-1800, 1820-1920, and 1960 to the present. Divide the students into three groups, and have each group take a

wave to focus on. Ask that each group research their period and present the findings to the class. In their search, they should include: who immigrated, from where did people immigrate, the push and pull factors (why people chose to leave their home country and why they chose to immigrate to the United States), and a few notable individuals who immigrated during this era. Encourage them to have fun with it and be creative!

2. Have students research Shearith Israel, the synagogue from the story. Today, Shearith Israel is located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and students can read about their history on http://www.shearithisrael.org/folder/main_frames_new.html. Then, have them write letters to the congregation, sharing what they learned and asking questions about the congregation and how it has changed since the 18th century.

3. Using the information provided in the book, have students draw a picture of what they imagine New York might have looked like during this period. Then, research what New York did look like during various periods. Compare the images. What do you notice? What changes do you see? To what do you attribute those changes? What might life have been like during these various periods?