# Study Guide for *Speed of Light* by Sybil Rosen

## 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 *Speed of Light* by Sybil Rosen. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the concept *koah hadibur* (the power of speech) addressed in the *Tevet* issue of BabagaNewz.

*Speed of Light* is the story of one girl's exploration and, in turn, assertion of her beliefs, despite peer pressure and potential danger. Told from eleven-year-old Audrey Stern's perspective, the novel traces the tumultuous events in the small town of Blue Gap, Virginia, in 1956. When Audrey's father advocates on behalf of Sam Cardwell, an African American man who wants to become a police officer, the once quiet town erupts. The community is polarized and largely resistant to the idea of integration. In addition, the townspeople's latent anti-Semitism begins to surface as a result of Mr. Stern's involvement in Mr. Cardwell's cause. Audrey, initially ignorant of issues of race, anti-Semitism and inequality, is quickly exposed to the injustices and concealed prejudices of her small town; she is not afraid to speak out against such injustice.

Audrey's education about civil rights is interconnected with her quest to unravel the mystery of her Tante Pesel, a Polish Holocaust survivor who moved in with them after the war. Throughout the course of the novel, Audrey discovers her own voice and effectively challenges the townspeople and the Jewish community to examine their deep-seated prejudices and move beyond their fear.

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

- Questions for study and discussion
- Passages for close analysis
- Lesson ideas
- Writing 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. What is it that Audrey's father recommends to the Blue Gap town council? Why are they resistant to the idea?

3. How did Tante Pesel come to live at the Stern's home? What about her own history causes her to discourage Audrey and her family from getting involved in town politics?

4. Who is Tante's doll supposed to represent? How does the discovery of the doll and the old family portrait help explain Tante's distant attitude toward Audrey?

5. Throughout the novel, Audrey disobeys her parents. She sneaks out of the house to see the events unfold firsthand. Do you think this was responsible behavior? What does she learn on these occasions? Do the lessons Audrey learns from her journeys outweigh the potential risks? Why or why not?

6. What is the theory of "nonviolence" that Sam Cardwell tells Audrey about? Describe a situation where the approach of nonviolence is utilized. Do you think this is an effective way to confront conflicts and opposition?

7. How do Buster's rants about the abusive nature of his father serve as an "explanation" of sorts for his own violent behavior? What is a "scapegoat" and how are both Sam and Audrey scapegoats for his anger?

8. Why do you think the author connects the story of Tante's family in Poland with the events in Blue Gap? What is the relationship, if any, between these events and historical periods?

9. In a dream, Audrey has a conversation with Albert Einstein about his theory of relativity and the speed of light (page 137). What does he tell her about the mind? What does this statement teach us about human potential?

10. Why do you think that *Speed of Light* is the title of the novel? What travels at the speed of light in the novel? How does Audrey's dream about Einstein help explain the title?

11. What about her experience at the Cardwell's church makes her believe in the possibility of change; the possibility of a better world?

12. What is the significance of the butterflies at the end of the book? How is the transition from caterpillar to butterfly similar to the changes taking place in Blue Gap?

## III. PASSAGES FOR CLOSE ANALYSIS

1. Page 46

" 'Mr. Cardwell's great-grandmother was born in one of those….We have the old county slave rolls in the library…At one time, she and her husband, and their five children all lived together. Nine people crammed together in a one-room shack.'
Her words put me in mind of the ghetto where Tante had been forced to live. 'Oh, Miss Farley, don't you wish you could make those piles disappear?'
… 'Not me, Audrey,' she replied. 'I want them to stay as long as they can. I think if I could, I'd rebuild them.'"

Why would Miss Farley want to rebuild something that was a reminder of slavery? What is the significance of the fact that Mr. Cardwell's children are not permitted into the library that was built on the grounds where he once lived?

2. Page 103
" 'And what if we're scared?' Uncle Lewis asked from the back.
Rabbi Grody turned to me, 'Were you scared, Audrey?'
I flushed. 'Yes, sir.'
'But you tried to help anyway?'
'I didn't think about it.'
'There's your answer,' he told my uncle."

Why is this an answer? What is Rabbi Grody trying to teach the congregation about fear?

3. Page 111
" 'Sam, you don't really think Mr. Monroe's going to hire your daddy.'
'It doesn't matter.'
'You don't mean that.'
'Yes, I do. All that matters is that we're trying. So long as we keep on, sooner or later something's got to give. Those people in Montgomery never thought the boycott would go on for so long, but it had.'"

According to Sam, what is the purpose if not for Mr. Cardwell to be appointed to the police force? How does hope play into their efforts for equal rights?

4. Page 168
"The world was full of brutal things, worse than you could ever imagine. But at the same time, it was filled with amazing things. Like shooting stars and butterflies being born and learning how to love. It was a paradox.

The universe wheeled above me, an endless mystery. And suddenly my mind stretched into the galaxy and my heart danced among the stars. I was fire and air and emptiness, burning and changing. I was water and soil and flowers. I was people too, with all their joys and their sorrows. I was everything at once.

Then the feeling faded and I was a girl sitting in a backyard."

What is the meaning of paradox? How is her statement about feeling like "everything at once" and then just "a girl sitting in a backyard" an example of a paradox? In your experiences, what are different ways to reconcile the paradoxes of life?

## IV. LESSON IDEAS

1. Use the novel as a basis for a discussion about *koa<u>h</u> hadibur*. What are ways that Audrey uses her words to affect change in her community? What fears and other obstacles did she have to face in order to assert herself?

Examine *Pirkei Avot* 1:14:

פרקי אבות א:יד

אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי? וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי? וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתַי?

"If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

and *Pirkei Avot* 2:21:

פרקי אבות ב:כא

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמוֹר וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרִין לְהִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה.

"It is not up to you to complete the work, yet you are not free to abstain from it."

How are Audrey's actions a positive example of these teachings?

2. Examine the power of speech by studying Martin Luther King Junior's "I Have a Dream." First, ask students to listen to the speech. What are their initial reactions? Do they think this is a powerful speech and if so, why? Next give students a written copy of the speech. In pairs, ask them to read through it carefully, underlining the persuasive language and any sources that he used. Why did Martin Luther King pick those particular sources; what about those sources reflects MLK Junior's dream?

3. Audrey was motivated by what she saw as an injustice in her town. Use the novel as a jumping off point to encourage student activism. First ask students what they think are the pressing concerns in the world right now. After brainstorming a list of key concerns, divide students into groups according to issues. Ask students to research their issue (online, from newspaper articles or in discussions with family members). After they have compiled a list of facts, students should compose a letter to their political representatives or other important parties outlining their position and then present their findings to the rest of the class.

**V. WRITING ACTIVITIES**

1. Write a newspaper article about Mr. Cardwell's appointment to the police force. Include a brief history of events and comments from the key players (Mr. Stern, Mr. Cardwell and Chief Monroe). Provide answers to the following questions: Why did Mr. Cardwell want to join the force? Why was Mr. Stern advocating on his behalf? Why did Chief Monroe decide, despite public pressure, to give Mr. Cardwell the job?

2. Compose the first few paragraphs of Miss Farley's version of the Declaration of Independence. Look at the language of the original Declaration of Independence for suggestions on the structure and language of the document. What values is she trying to promote? Are these same values reflected in the original document?

3. Write a journal entry from Tante Pesel's perspective at different points in the narrative. Assign students to different dates leading up to and immediately following the Fourth of July parade. What are her concerns and what are the foundations for these concerns? What tensions, if any, does she feel between moral obligation and personal fear? Afterwards, use the entries to create a class journal, charting the changes in Tante Pesel's outlook and attitude throughout the summer.

**VI. PROJECTS**

1. Create a class scrapbook that documents the events that took place in Blue Gap from the start of the novel to Mr. Cardwell's eventual appointment to the force. The scrapbook belongs to Audrey and as a result, students should include key items from the story. For example, the scrapbook might include the snapshot of Audrey in the newspaper, a picture of Tante Pesel's family, journal entries about her thoughts on Einstein and time, a newspaper clipping about the bus boycott, a picture of Joel's butterflies, etc.

2. After happening upon the Church of Blue Gap and listening to their voices singing, Audrey notes, “Listening to their voices, it seemed to me that these folks kept in their hearts the true image of a perfect world” (p. 151). Either in writing or by drawing/painting, ask students to represent their image of a perfect world. What are moments in their lives when they sense that potential for change? How are these words and pictures a response to the “brutal things” that Audrey alludes to? Use these writing and images to create a class tapestry made up of the students dreams and visions.

3. Using the same issue that the students identified in question 3 of the Lesson Ideas above, ask students to create a poster or a brochure outlining important facts and any other information they want to include to speak out on the issue. Encourage students to think about what artistic and linguistic features make for an effective brochure. This activity thereby becomes a further extension of student activism and an exercise in persuasive language and advertising.