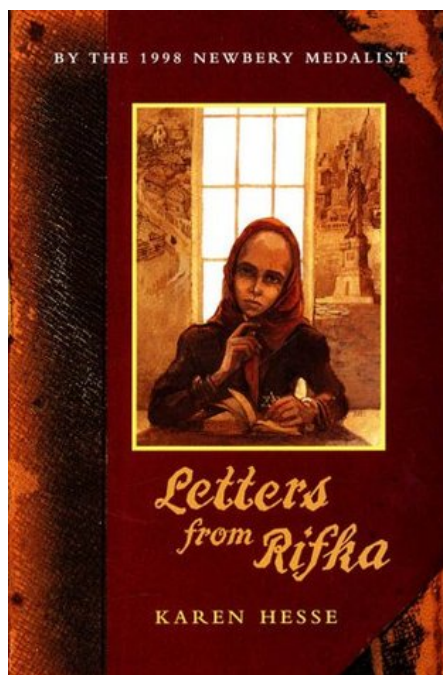




Letters from Rifka

Karen Hesse

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Letters from Rifka Karen Hesse

From Newbery media winner Karen Hesse comes an unforgettable story of an immigrant family's journey to America.

"America," the girl repeated. "What will you do there?"

I was silent for a little time.

"I will do everything there," I answered.

Rifka knows nothing about America when she flees from Russia with her family in 1919. But she dreams that in the new country she will at last be safe from the Russian soldiers and their harsh treatment of the Jews. Throughout her journey, Rifka carries with her a cherished volume of poetry by Alexander Pushkin. In it, she records her observations and experiences in the form of letters to Tovah, the beloved cousin she has left behind.

Strong-hearted and determined, Rifka must endure a great deal: humiliating examinations by doctors and soldiers, deadly typhus, separation from all she has ever known and loved, murderous storms at sea, detainment on Ellis Island--and is if this is not enough, the loss of her glorious golden hair.

Based on a true story from the author's family, *Letters from Rifka* presents a real-life heroine with an uncommon courage and unsinkable spirit.

Letters from Rifka Details

Date : Published (first published January 1st 1992)

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Author : Karen Hesse

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Ashley *Hufflepuff Kitten* says

A very interesting MG story about a Russian Jewish girl who gets separated from her family when they emigrate to America in 1919-1920. For some reason I was afraid the story wouldn't have a happy ending, but I was pleasantly surprised and glad for Rifka, after all that she endured alone.

Meaghan says

Although this is a compelling and suspenseful story, the epistolary/diary format really doesn't work. It's very hard to get those to work right, and in this case it has the usual problem: the narrative is WAY too detailed to make a convincing letter.

There is also the problem of Rifka writing facts in her letters that the reader doesn't know, but which her cousin clearly would -- like, listing the names of her brothers, when in a real letter she would just say "My brothers," and also explaining about pogroms and the Russian government drafting Jewish boys as soldiers -- which her cousin, being a Russian Jew, would not need to be told. The author could have been more smooth in imparting necessary information, perhaps in a foreword.

Maybe most people aren't bothered by that sort of thing, but it bothers me. Hence, three stars instead of four.

Jamie says

I really liked this book. It was a quick read and the history was so interwoven into the story that I felt I learned a lot while following the intriguing narrative. Rifka's voice really shines through this book - you can really feel her pain and joy and how much she grows by the end of the book. It is also really interesting to have the story told through letters to a cousin that are never sent but simply written to help her stay sane and record her journey.

Bish Denham says

Although a compelling story, there was something about this book that didn't quite work for me. It was somehow flat emotionally. Perhaps it was the letter format and the jumping around from tense to tense. Perhaps it was explaining things to her cousin that her cousin would obviously already know but had to be told so the reader would understand why things happened as they did.

I really wanted to like Rifka because her story is so big, but I wasn't able to connect with her. Her story is one that many people and children went through and one that needed to be told.

In the end I liked it because it is a story about overcoming great odds and about learning that we are all human beings in search of a safe place to call home. In this day and age, when there is so much turbulence in the world and so many people are being forced from their homes, Rifka's story is a universal one.

Janine says

I think this book is really good. Rifka and her family escaped from Russia to America. But when they were in Poland buying the tickets to America. The doctor discovered that she had ringworm on her head. So she need to go to Belgium to cure her illness. Finally she went to Ellis island and entered the America. I think the title fit the story because in the book rifka was writing the letters to her beloved cousin, Tovah. So the title is call Letters from Rifka.

Linda Lipko says

Karen Hesse also wrote Out of the Dust, one of my favorite Newbery award winning books. Once again, I am in awe of Hesses' ability to portray a historical period with characters who take us on a journey through time wherein the emotions and the setting paint a vivid image of difficult adversity.

This book is well deserving of the many accolades it received, including some of the following:

Horn Book Outstanding Book of the Year
American Library Association Notable Book
National Jewish Book Award

Travel with a twelve-year old Jewish young woman Rifka as she and her family dangerously slip out of Russia to avoid persecution. Her prize possession is a book of poetry by the great Russian author Puskin. Learn the courage and difficulty of the immigrant experience. Smile at the fortitude of this spunky character who faces extreme adversity.

As Rifka travels she writes to her cousin Tovah who remains in Russia. The book is a series of letters of Rifka's journey and her dramatic experiences as her family flees senseless hate and bigotry with the hope of a new life in America.

Taken from real life experience of the author's Aunt Lucy, this is a compelling story of despair balanced with hope, of loss and then gain, of tragedy and then light.

Highly recommended!

Adam Geisler says

Hesse was inspired to write this touching story by her own aunt's journey from Russia to America. Stylistically, she chose to narrate it by way of letters from the teenage protagonist to her cousin back home. The "letters" are actually written in a copy of a book of Pushkin poetry that is one of the few possessions Rifka is able to bring along with her. The pathos of Pushkin permeates the story as she encounters

discrimination, mistreatment, and separation from family. Her voice is strong as she matures under these trying circumstances. The level is appropriate and accessible for young adolescent readers.

Jamie Ayres says

Great book to read with a sixth or seventh grade class as a way of slowly introducing the topic of the Holocaust (in our county, we really delve into that area in 8th grade). My whole class loved it!

Dom Perry (dom the book thief) says

Although this is a harrowing story and historically accurate, this didn't do it for me.

3 stars is still good so I didn't NOT like it. I just had a difficult time getting into it. I wish the narration style was the typical one: Main Character telling us her story. The letters didn't work for me just because of all the detail. Yes, this detail is needed to tell a story but it is unrealistic when it comes to a letter. Also, the language made it difficult to believe Rifka is only 12-13 years old.

I wish we got to see more of who Tovah is. Clearly she's a favorite cousin but WHY? Why write to her and not cousin Hannah?

But there was still a part that made me tear up and I really liked the Pushkin quotes. I wish I had Rifka's ability to learn languages.

Andrew Duros says

Andrew Duros
World Literature
Ms. Young
Letters From Rifka
By Karen Hesse

Can you envision yourself being in a country alone while the rest of your family travels across countries without you? In the book Letters from Rifka by Karen Hesse, a young Jewish girl named Rifka, has to go through an experience such as escaping religious belief and running away from pogroms. She endures prejudice, displays family loyalty, and shows perseverance and growth.

In the early 1900's, Russians are prejudice towards Jews, such as Rifka and her family. Soldiers and guards stole from them and treated them disrespectively. The Russians use the Jews as scapegoats, so that when a Jewish family does something against law, the Jews are in for a burden. As Rifka says at the beginning of the book,

“The guards spoke ill of us, not because of anything we had done, not because of anything we said. Just because we were Jews.” (Hesse 25). When Rifka and her family were trying to escape on the train, Rifka's task was to distract the guards. During that time period, most people assumed that stereotypes were true. Rifka's blonde hair and blue eyes gave her the image that she was Russian. If they were to find out that she was a Jew, Rifka and her family would be in for the worst. Probably be beaten or more likely killed. It's difficult to live a life in Russia when you're a Jew.

During the journey, family loyalty is shown in numerous ways. Rifka is separated from her family multiple times. Yet, every time they reunite they have an even stronger bond. While on the expedition for an escape to America, no matter how long they are separated; Rifka's family always manages to join together once again. When they get back together, happiness fills the air. "I was so happy that I thought my heart had broken open like an egg," (Hesse 98). Rifka recorded, in her Pushkin book. Whether it is a short time, like when men and women are separated during the doctors inspection in Poland or a long amount of time, such as when Rifka stays behind waiting for her ringworm to heal while the rest of the family goes to America, it shows the families strength and bond. Another example of family loyalty in Rifka's story is when the entire family gets typhus besides Saul, after Rifka heals from the disease. Saul makes sure they have a place to sleep and stay at, while he also took a job just so they can have food. When they did get something to eat, Saul split it equally between himself and Rifka even though he needed more since he is older and working. He shows that family is the most important thing in times like these, so you have to take care of them no matter what. Throughout the experiences Rifka has encounters, she matures and begins to understand how unfair life can be, but you have to learn to accept it. She shows perseverance and growth. For example, when Rifka first met Ilya, she thought he was just another prejudice Russian peasant who wanted to make her life more miserable. But she soon realizes that he is just a young boy, so she becomes an adult by helping him to show the doctors he was not a simpleton, so he can go on to America. The nurses at the hospital called Rifka the "little mother" because she cared for him as if they were family. Rifka has gone through events such as the orange seller cheating Rifka out of her money because she has never seen an orange before, therefore not knowing how much it would cost. Or when Saul and Rifka were staying at the hotel, the owner's daughter stole Rifka's food that she saved for Saul. Also, when Rifka was in Belgium, she thought people were not going to accept her because she was bald, so she hid in her room all day. Sister Katrina, a nun nurse who worked at the hospital, help her realize that people should not care if she has hair or not. She makes Rifka go around town and explore, to help her grow and understand real life. If any of these occurrences that happen at the very beginning of the book, we all reckon that Rifka would act more like a coward and take the easier route. Now, she knows that you can't always get what you want.

Rifka went through many tough times, but through all of the prejudice she made it. With family loyalty helping her go the right way during hard situations she eventually understood ways of life. It is incredible how much Rifka has grown and persevered over the months, making her an extraordinary lady. Overall, Rifka got through the taunting and cruel acts of life and was pulled into a new, better lifestyle with her family. "Here Rifka Nebrot," he said. "Welcome to America." (Hesse 161).

Overall, Letters From Rifka, is a charming read and quite the page turner about Rifka being separated by her family and her facing the world alone for most of the time. In her hometown, not only just Rifka and her family but all Jewish people in her town hate those types of people because they're not Russian. I'd say that's a good example of religious motif. Also, she fought bravely and always kept reminding herself that she could see her family again in the United States. Even though, it wasn't one of my favorite books, I still enjoyed it! The more I got into the book, the more exciting the book was! I have to say, Letters From Rifka, was filled with knowledge about Rifka, her family, friends, and about what she had to do in order to earn freedom. If I could give this book six out of five stars, I most definitely would! Instead I will give it an energetic five out of five stars. I highly recommend reading this book because honestly this book is quite miraculous.

Becky Graham says

This was a 'required' reading for our son in middle school. We listened to it via audiobooks which was very nice. Then, with only 5 chapters left, we stopped listening.

What I didn't realize, until after I read a commentary, was that Pushkin was the author of the poetry book she

read. The letters she would write to her dear cousin back in Russia were written in the margins of her book. I love reading of Rifka's journey and love the ending of this book!

Maureen says

Letters from Rifka is the riveting story of a young girl and her family who make a daring and courageous escape from the pogroms of 1919 Russia. The story is told in a series of letters from Rifka to her cousin Tovah who is still in Russia. The family contracts typhus during their journey to the port where they hope to board a boat to America. They barely survive, but do make it to Antwerp, where Rifka is detained because of ringworm. Her family is forced to make the difficult decision to journey ahead of her, but Rifka must stay with a family in Belgium to be treated by nuns until her ringworm heals. She eventually is allowed to make the passage, albeit alone to America. When she finally arrives after a harrowing crossing, she is then detained at Ellis Island because she is bald, for fear that her baldness will make her unmarried and thus become a ward of the state. Her courage, brilliance, determination, and loving kindness give her the strength to finally enter America, be reunited with her family, and meet the brothers she had never met who had immigrated years before she was born.

This novel offers an unforgettable portrayal of the immigrant experience. It is a perfect read aloud choice for a 4th or 5th grade immigration unit, and will hopefully inspire students to research their own family's immigration history. I encouraged my students to interview a family member in order to learn how and why their own ancestors (or perhaps their own generation if they are new Americans) came to America. As students discover the cross cultural similarities among their stories, students develop a more authentic and powerful appreciation of the sacrifices made by previous generations so they they could grow up in America. Karen Hesse gleaned the story idea from her own aunt's immigration story as explained in the Author's Notes.

Rifka is a richly crafted character who overcomes overwhelming obstacles in order to arrive at Ellis Island. She is vulnerable yet strong, wise yet innocent, and fiercely self-advocating yet forgiving of other's shortcomings.

As an enrichment activity, explore the poetry of Pushkin that introduces each chapter. It may be very challenging for most students, but others may be able to infer a message of hope and triumph from the lyrical language.

Sue Seligman says

Excellent story about the immigration of Russian Jewish families through Ellis Island during the early 1900s. Perfect for teachers who are focusing on immigration in their 5th and 6th grade classrooms. Similar to The Orphan of Ellis Island.

Katie Ulmen-Smith says

"Letter From Rifka" by Karen Hesse, Holt Publishing, 1992. 148 pages. Genre: Historical Fiction, Grade Level: 4-6, Lexile Level: 660 L, Guided Reading Level: S

In this historical fiction novel readers are brought back in time to the turmoil that shrouded many European

and Eastern European countries specifically Russia during the 1919 Russian Civil War. The novel is about Rifka, a young blonde haired, blue eyed Jewish girl from Russia. As the story begins, Rifka and her family (her mother, father, and older brother) are fleeing their village and their extended family in order to secure the safety of her brother from the Russian army. Her other two brothers have already fled to America where they made enough money to send for the rest of the family. Money is the easiest piece of this journey however as they begin their dangerous trek through Europe. Although this is prior to the Holocaust, there is much hatred against the Jews even during this era and they must overcome that during their voyage. As they travel, Rifka finds solace in writing letters to her cousin in a poem book called a Pushkin. In it, Rifka puts the stories of her travels as well as her deepest fears. The journey to America halted for Rifka when during a mandatory checkpoint in Belgium, she discovers she has ringworm. Unable to continue on with her parents, Rifka must stay behind until she regains her health. Rifka must come to terms with the fact that she may never see any of her family again as she is trapped in a foreign country far from her homeland and the ones she loves.

One teaching idea that I believe would very beneficial for 8th grade students would be to read this book about immigration during times of turmoil and then describe what they know about how immigrants lived in the United States during this era. The students will choose to be one of the main characters in the book and then write a journal entry about their average day...what their housing would be like, what jobs they would do, how were their religious beliefs received, etc. Students will use notes from the class and they will also be given a list of primary source journal entries that they will have to pick from to include extra details. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.8.3

Ashley says

Beautiful historical fiction story about a young girl trying to flee from Russia to America for a better life. She is kept back from her family due to ring worm, and yearns to see her family once again. Great choice for historical fiction book clubs for upper elementary.

Favorite quote:

"I leave behind my cousins, young and dear;
They'll never know the freedom I have known,
Or learn as I have learned, that kindness dwells,
In hearts that have no fear." (Page 140)
