

The Chosen, by Chaim Potok

The Author

Herman Harold Potok was born in The Bronx in 1929. He was the oldest of four children, all of whom either became rabbis or married one. His Hebrew name was Chaim Tzvi (יבצ מייח). He received an Orthodox Jewish education. He started writing fiction at the age of 16. At age 17 he made his first submission to the magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*. Although it wasn't published, he received a note from the editor complimenting his work.

After four years of study at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America he was ordained as a Conservative rabbi. He was appointed director of LTF, Leaders Training Fellowship, a youth organization affiliated with Conservative Judaism.

Potok met Adena Sara Mosevitzsky, a psychiatric social worker, at Camp Ramah in Ojai, California, where he served as camp director (1957–1959). They were married on June 8, 1958, and had three children.

After receiving a master's degree in Hebrew literature, Potok enlisted with the U.S. Army as a chaplain. He served in South Korea from 1955 to 1957. He described his time in South Korea as a transformative experience. Brought up to believe that the Jewish people were central to history and God's plans, he experienced a region where there were almost no Jews and no anti-Semitism, yet whose religious believers prayed with the same fervor that he saw in Orthodox synagogues at home.

After the publication of *Old Men At Midnight*, he was diagnosed with brain cancer. He died at his home in Merion, Pennsylvania on July 23, 2002, aged 73.

Chaim Potok says. . .

“As a species, we are hungry for new knowledge”

“I think that to a very great extent we are partners with the divine in this enterprise called history. That is an ongoing relationship, and there is absolutely no guarantee that things will automatically work out to our best advantage.”

The Work

In 1940s Brooklyn, New York, an accident throws Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders together. Despite their differences (Reuven is a Modern Orthodox Jew with an intellectual, Zionist father; Danny is the brilliant son and rightful heir to a Hasidic rebbe), the young men form a deep, if unlikely, friendship. Together they negotiate adolescence, family conflicts, the crisis of faith engendered when Holocaust stories begin to emerge in the U.S., loss, love, and the journey to adulthood. The intellectual and spiritual clashes between fathers, between each son and his own father, and

between the two young men, provide a unique backdrop for this exploration of fathers, sons, faith, loyalty, and, ultimately, the power of love.

The Questions

1. What does this novel seem to suggest or say about America?
2. Compare and contrast the characters of Reb Saunders and Mr. Malter:
 - as fathers
 - as teachersand in terms of:
 - their world views
 - their views of Judaism
 - their views of Zionism
3. Analyze the Hasidic practice of bring up a child "in silence." What is the purpose and the effect of this practice? Discuss its effect on Danny and divide the class into two groups: one who role is to defend Danny's upbringing; the other whose role is to criticize it. Debate the issue as Reb Saunders and Mr. Malter might have, had they come face to face. Use the text as a reference.
4. Discuss the role of female characters in **The Chosen**. What accounts for their discernible lack of influence in the book? Was this deliberate on Potok's part? Use evidence from the novel to support your view of this question.
5. Although they are both practicing Jews, there is much in Danny's upbringing Reuven does not understand or approve of. Pair the class into sets of "Reuven's" and "Dannys". Have each Reuven draw up all his questions about and objections to the way his friend is being raised. Have each Danny draw up a response to this. Then arrange a whole class forum where both the objections and responses can be aired.
6. Talk about the process of identification which occurs between the reader and character. Have the class talk about ways in which they were able to identify with the characters in **The Chosen**. Discuss the universal nature of the conflict between parent and child and its role in literature. Ask for books your students have read in which this conflict is apparent.
7. What do you believe to be the three most important ideas contained in **The Chosen**? In an essay, discuss each one referring directly to instances in the book to support your beliefs. After doing so, rank each idea in order of importance.

8. Discuss one or two important historical moments and how they affect Reb and Danny differently.

9. How did reading **The Chosen** add to your knowledge of Judaism, its history, religious beliefs and practices, its cultural values? Discuss in detail how the book clarified or corrected your previous beliefs about Judaism and include any surprised you derived.

10. In an essay, discuss the values and beliefs of Reb Saunders and Mr. Malter, and show how the novel dramatizes the affect these had on the development of Danny and Reuven. Then analyze your own parents' values and beliefs, exploring the way they have shaped, and are continuing to shape, your identity.

11. Reuven's father tells him, "The Talmud says that a person should do two things for himself. One is to acquire a teacher." Danny remembers that the other is to choose a friend. In what ways have both Danny and Reuven done these things for themselves? What has each boy derived from the teacher? From the friend?