



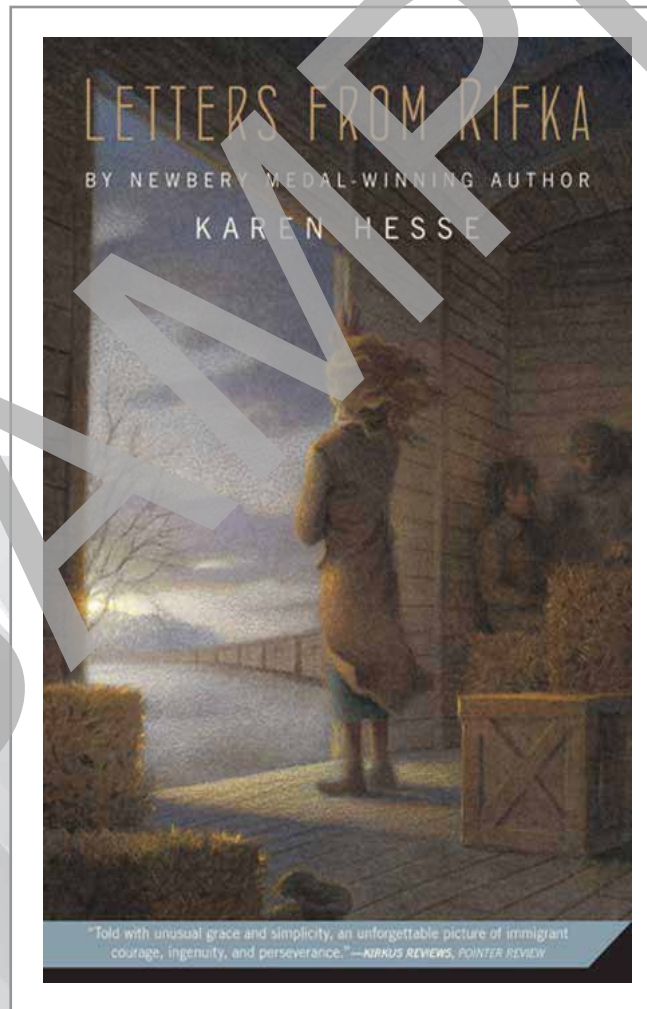
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 6-8

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Letters from Rifka

Karen Hesse



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Letters from Rifka

Karen Hesse

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Skills and Strategies

Thinking

Comparing, evaluating, analyzing details, explaining, summarizing, categorizing, organizing, observing, forming opinions

Writing

Research, short paragraphs, captions, short story, episode, interviews, survey, poetry, letters, jingles

Listening/Speaking

Participation in discussions, role-play, participation in dramatic activities, defending opinions, describing, persuasion, recording, non-verbal communication

Literary Elements

Character analysis, setting, plot, figurative language, motivation, foreshadowing, suspense, cliffhanger, irony, proverbs

Comprehension

Predicting, comparing, story mapping, defining, sequencing, describing, points of view

Vocabulary

Target words, target word maps, use and effectiveness of words, synonyms, word comparisons, sorting, root/base words, alphabetizing, antonyms

Summary of *Letters From Rifka*

Nathan Nebrot deserts from the Russian Army to warn his younger brother, Saul, that the soldiers will soon follow to take Saul into the army. Papa decides that it is time they all leave Russia. The three eldest sons in America have sent for the rest of the family, and a new life awaits Nathan, Saul, Rifka, Mama and Papa. The journey to America is not easy. Twelve-year-old Rifka records the good experiences and the bad experiences by writing letters to her cousin Tovah on the margins of the pages in a book of poems by Pushkin. The family members are humiliated by both the doctors and the soldiers. Typhus strikes everyone but Saul, which slows the journey to Warsaw. Rifka is separated from her family in Warsaw. She has ringworm and must go to Belgium for treatment while the others travel on to America. Eventually cured, but bald, Rifka sails on a small ship bound from Antwerp to America. Rifka nearly drowns during a horrible storm, and the ship is so badly damaged that it must be towed to New York. Rifka is detained at the hospital for contagious diseases on Ellis Island. She is told that her lack of hair makes her an undesirable immigrant. While waiting for her case to be decided, Rifka helps the doctors and nurses, learns English, and translates for both Russian and Polish patients. She also befriends a young Russian boy, Ilya. During this time, Rifka also decides to write her own poetry. With all of her family in attendance, Rifka's case is reviewed. She presents a strong argument on her own behalf, and some of her poetry is read by Ilya. Rifka is finally allowed to join her family in America.

About the Author

Karen Hesse was born August 29, 1952, in Baltimore, Maryland. She attended the University of Maryland and received a B.A. degree in 1975. Hesse has been employed as a leave-benefit coordinator, teacher, librarian, advertising secretary, typesetter and proofreader. While she was growing up in Baltimore, Hesse felt separated from others. She was unable to blend in or trust those around her. Hesse writes for children who are like the child that she once was. She wants to let her young readers know that they are not alone in the world. Hesse presents characters who survive ordeals, and who grow and develop in spite of, or because of, them.

Background Information

Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society:

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society continues to provide a broad program of services for Jewish refugees and migrants at all stages of the migration process. Under a contractual arrangement with the government of the United States, the Society also provides these services to non-Jewish clients.

Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, 333 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10001-5004
(212) 967-4100 Email: info@hias.org (10/96)

Prereading Discussion:

Ask the students to generate ideas or terms that come to mind when the word MIGRATE is mentioned. Organize the suggestions into categories. Encourage the students to add to the chart during and after the reading of the novel. For example:

MIGRATE			
immigrate arrive colonize come in go in settle	journey trip pilgrimage travel trek rove	wander roam range	move relocate resettle

Have the students refer to the *Author's Note* on pages ix and x. Discuss the different ways in which the lives of people may be recorded, such as: biography, autobiography, and the fictionalization of an account. Ask students to give examples of each recording method by an author mentioned in their discussion.

<u>Autobiography</u>	<u>Biography</u>	<u>Fictionalized Real Life</u>

Personal Observations:

Have students keep personal journals to record their feelings and comments as the situations in *Letters From Rifka* are discussed. They also might want to write about how they think they might handle similar situations, such as: being separated from loved ones, going hungry, being humiliated by others, etc. These journals do not have to be shared.

Recommended Book List:

Display a large sheet of paper in the room. Ask students to fill in the requested information, to share books they would recommend to others.

<u>Book Title</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Comments</u>

Chapter-by-Chapter Vocabulary, Discussion Questions, and Activities

September 2, 1919—Russia: Pages 1-15

Summary:

Mr. and Mrs. Nebrot and their children Nathan, Saul and Rifka escape from Russia in 1919. Their destination is America. Twelve-year-old Rifka records her journey in a series of letters that she writes to her cousin Tovah on the blank pages and margins in a book of Pushkin's poetry. In this first letter, Rifka tells of how she and her Uncle Avrum deceive the guards at the train station in Berdichev. The journey begins!

Vocabulary:

exile 1	flickering 2	distract 2	rucksack 3
emerged 3	deserts 4	regiment 4	riddance 4
huddled 5	precaution 5	clutched 7	pivoted 10
involve 13	influence 14	shalom 15	

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Nathan desert from the Russian Army? (Page 4, *Nathan comes home to warn his brother, Saul, that the soldiers will soon come to take him into the army.*) What are the consequences of Nathan's desertion? (Page 4, "...when a Jewish boy deserts the Russian Army, the army tries hard to find him. They bring him back and kill him in front of his regiment as a warning to the others. Those who have helped him, they also die.") What do you think of Nathan's decision to desert and of the reason for the desertion?
2. What does Mrs. Nebrot want Rifka to put into her rucksack? Why? (Page 5, *Mrs. Nebrot wants Rifka to pack the family's candlesticks in her rucksack. Mrs. Nebrot tells Rifka, "We either take them, Rifka, or leave them to the greedy peasants. Soon enough they will swoop down like vultures to pick our house bare."*) What do you think Mrs. Nebrot means by her statement to Rifka? Why do you think the candlesticks might be important to Mrs. Nebrot and to the family?
3. What does Rifka overhear the guards talk about at the train station? (Page 6, *Rifka hears the guards talk about the members of her family. Rifka writes to Tovah, "The guards spoke ill of us, not because of anything we had done, not because of anything we had said. Just because we were Jews."*) What is your opinion of those who speak ill of others in an instance such as this, when a generalization is being made or at any time when there is no real, first-hand knowledge on which to base what is being said?

-
4. Why is Rifka chosen to be the one to divert the Russian soldiers away from the boxcars where the other family members are hiding? Who are the soldiers looking for? (*Page 8, Rifka has blond hair and blue eyes and can pass for a Russian peasant. She can also speak Russian without a Yiddish accent. Pages 5-6, The soldiers are looking for Nathan.*) Is she successful? Why or why not?
 5. Uncle Avrum tells Rifka she has a “gift” for language, and she asks Tovah, “What kind of gift is this, Tovah?” (page 8) If you were Tovah, how would you answer Rifka?
 6. How does Uncle Avrum get the guards away from the train? (*Page 13, He tells the guards that someone has broken into his factory.*) Why do the guards go with Uncle Avrum? (*Page 14, The guards go with Uncle Avrum because “He has important friends.”*) Do you think having “important friends” should matter in this instance, or in any instance? Why or why not?
 7. Why is Rifka writing letters about her journey to her cousin Tovah? (*Page 15, Rifka tells Tovah, “...in writing to you, I feel less frightened...I cannot bear to think of never talking to you again. So I will talk to you by writing about my journey.”*) Why do you think Rifka would feel “less frightened” by writing to her cousin?

Supplementary Activities:

1. Foreshadowing is an indication or suggestion beforehand. Foreshadowing provides a hint of something that is to occur later. Uncle Avrum speaks of Rifka’s “gift” for language. Make a notation each time Rifka’s gift for language, both spoken and written, is useful to her. At the end of the story, summarize these incidents and draw a conclusion. Do you agree or disagree with Uncle Avrum? Why?
2. Start character attribute webs for Rifka, Saul, Nathan and Mr. and Mrs. Nebrot. Add to the webs as more is learned about them. (Characterization is the way an author lets the reader know what the characters are like. In direct characterization, the author describes the character directly. In indirect characterization, the author provides clues about the character through thoughts, speech and actions.)
3. Start a story map.
4. Trace Rifka’s journey on a world map. (Berdichev is located southwest of Kiev.)
5. Start a daily journal. Summarize the events of each day in various letter forms, such as: a letter to a friend, a letter of membership solicitation, a letter of solicitation for a contribution, a letter of a court summons, a letter of condolence, a letter of social invitation, etc.