

★ American Girl®

# REBECCA

1914

A Teacher's Guide to

## The Sound of Applause

*A story about  
Jewish immigrant life  
in America*

Lexile measure: 700L



## About the Book

Growing up on New York City's Lower East Side in 1914, Rebecca Rubin and her family honor the traditions of their Russian Jewish heritage. The middle child of five children, Rebecca longs to be the center of attention. When relatives back in Russia need money to immigrate to America, Rebecca decides to put on a sidewalk show—but her grandmother is horrified to see Rebecca passing a hat for money. So Rebecca begins to secretly sell her needlework in her father's shoe store. When the relatives finally arrive in New York, the entire Rubin family is there to meet the ferry from Ellis Island. At school, Rebecca helps her cousin Ana learn English, but when Ana is assigned to sing with her in a school program, Rebecca worries that Ana's broken English will ruin the show. Her stories show the often-conflicting pressures in immigrant families between tradition and assimilation. (Lexile measure: 700L)

## About This Guide

Elementary students may know very little about immigration in the early 20th century. The nonfiction essay at the back of the book, "Inside Rebecca's World," sets the stage for this time of hope and struggle in American history. There are natural connections to the language arts, social studies, science and health, drama, and music curricula. This guide encourages students to be careful readers without diminishing the pleasure they gain from reading. It is recommended that students read the entire book before engaging in a detailed study of the novel. Students should also find the glossary in the back of the book before they begin and use it as they read. Some activities in this guide take longer than others, and a teacher should feel free to choose only those activities that meet the learning needs of the students in the class.

## The Common Core Standards

This guide notes when an activity helps students achieve specific Common Core Standards. A key to the standards referenced is provided at the end of the guide. Schools that don't use the standards can simply ignore them and use the guide as part of a quality reading program.

## Pre-Reading Activity

Have students read "Inside Rebecca's World." (p. 112-116). Describe the immigration of Russian Jews to the United States between 1880 and 1914. Why did they leave their country? Ask students to list at least three ways that people were "pushed" out of Russia and three ways that they were "pulled" to America. Discuss the traditions they brought with them from their home country and the adjustments they faced in their new country. Then have students write a one-page paper that addresses the following question: What do you think was the most difficult adjustment for the immigrants as they began their new life in America? Have students share their work with the class.

*Correlates to Common Core Standards in Language Arts in Reading Informational Text: Key Ideas & Details RI. 3-4.3; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 3-4.1; Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 3-4.4; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-4.1.*

## Thematic Connections

### Family

Describe Rebecca's family by making an extended family tree. How are Bubbie and Grandpa an important part of the Rubin family? Rebecca's father is worried about his brother Jacob and his family, who are trying to escape Russia. How does the family pull together to help? Max, Mama's cousin, is an actor. How does the family view him? Why is Rebecca so intrigued with him? What do Bubbie and Grandpa think of Max? Does their opinion change after Max gets a part in a movie? Why is Rebecca looking forward to meeting her cousin Ana from Russia? Discuss how their relationship changes from the time Ana arrives until Uncle Jacob moves his family to a tenement on Orchard Street.

### Sibling Relationships

Discuss Rebecca's place in the family. Why does she feel disconnected from her twin sisters and her brothers? Cite specific scenes in the novel where Rebecca feels left out, especially by her older sisters. How does the age difference account for some of the sibling rivalry? At what point does Rebecca begin to feel included? What does Rebecca offer her family that changes her sisters' attitude toward her?

### Friendship

Describe Rebecca and Rose's friendship. Contrast their personalities. How does Rose try to keep Rebecca out of trouble? Discuss whether Rose's experiences as an immigrant cause her to see things that Rebecca is incapable of seeing. Describe Rebecca's friendship with her cousin Ana. How does their relationship grow and change? What does Rebecca teach Ana, and what does she learn from Ana?

### Kindness and *Mitzvah*

Discuss the relationship between kindness and friendship. How do you show kindness to friends, classmates, or family members? Describe how Rebecca's father treats his customers with kindness. He explains the Yiddish term *mitzvah* to Rebecca. (p. 34; see also glossary) Discuss the term and how it applies to his actions and to Rebecca's in the story. Explain Rebecca's thoughts toward Ana singing with her in the assembly. How do Rebecca's classmates' remarks about Ana's accent affect her judgment? Describe how Rose helps Rebecca understand what Ana may be feeling, and cite other kind and unkind thoughts and actions in the novel. At what point does Rebecca begin to truly understand the meaning of *mitzvah*?

### Achievement

Max thinks that Rebecca is a "natural" actress. How does this make her feel? Why does Rebecca "swell with pride" when she receives praise from Bubbie and Mrs. Berg about her crocheting skill? Rebecca is surprised to learn that Papa knows she has been making secret deals at the shoe store. How is Papa proud of his daughter's business success? What does Bubbie think of it, and why is Rebecca surprised by Bubbie's reaction? In what other areas does Rebecca achieve?

### Fear

Uncle Jacob is afraid for his family's safety in Russia. How does Rebecca's family share his fear? Rebecca wants to give Papa the money she has made selling her crochet work, but she is afraid to admit what she has done. Why does she think Papa will be displeased? What other fears does Rebecca face in the novel? Josef, Uncle Jacob's son, is detained at Ellis Island because of a leg injury. Discuss how this creates more fear for Uncle Jacob and his family. Make a list of the fears that immigrants experienced in the new world, citing examples from the novel.

## Courage and Chutzpah

Discuss the relationship between courage and fear. How does it take courage for immigrants to leave their homeland for a new beginning? How does it take courage for Ana to attend school with Rebecca? *Chutzpah* is the Yiddish word for *nerve* or *boldness*. Cite passages in the book where Rebecca needs to develop a little more chutzpah. How does chutzpah help a person in some situations and cause problems in others? How is chutzpah like courage, and how is it different?

## Anti-Semitism and Prejudice

Define *anti-Semitism*. How were Russian Jews victims of anti-Semitism back in Russia? Cite passages in the book where Rebecca's classmates display anti-Semitic views. Miss Maloney punishes Rebecca when she explains something to Ana in Yiddish. Debate whether Rebecca's punishment was fair or unfair. Rebecca's classmates laugh about Ana's accent. Discuss whether this shows prejudice toward Jews or toward new immigrants in general. Is this surprising behavior, given that the school is located in a community with many immigrants?

## Cultural Traditions and New Ways

Discuss the difference between cultural traditions and religious traditions. How is religion one part of a culture? In what ways are Bubbie and Grandpa traditional in their views? How does the Rubin family observe religious traditions? Why is Ana surprised when she opens her school lunch and finds a bagel? Is the eating of bagels at funerals a cultural tradition or a religious one? Describe Bubbie and Grandpa's attitude toward Rebecca's father for opening the shoe store on the Sabbath. How does Papa explain his reason? How might immigrants adopt new ways without giving up their traditions?

*Correlates to Common Core Standards in Language Arts in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 3-4.1, RL. 3-4.3; Craft & Structure RL. 3-4.4, RL. 3-4.5, RL. 3-4.6; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 3-4.7, RL. 3-4.9; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-4.1; Knowledge of Language L. 3-4.3; Vocabulary Acquisition & Use RL. 3-4.5a; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 3-4.1, SL. 3-4.2, SL. 3-4.3; Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 3-4.6.*

## Curriculum Connections

### Language Arts

*Idioms* are expressions commonly used in a language that have figurative meanings and aren't to be taken literally. For example, what do people mean when they say "You are pulling my leg"? Ana says that America is a "land of milk and honey." (p. 68) Ask students to write a paragraph that explains the meaning of this idiom. Instruct them to cite passages from the novel to support their thoughts. Encourage peer editing for clarity, spelling, and grammar.

*Correlates to Common Core Standards in Language Arts in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 3-4.5a; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-4.1; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 3-4.5.*

Have students read some of the family stories at [www.libertyellisfoundation.org/family-histories](http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/family-histories). (The story of Millie Libman connects to Rebecca's family.) Why are family stories important in helping others understand the Ellis Island experience? Tell students that Ellis Island was called "An Island of Hope, An Island of Tears." Divide the class into groups of four, and ask students to record an oral history of Uncle Jacob, Aunt Fannie, Ana, and Josef talking about their experience at Ellis Island. Explain the "hope" and the "tears" of their stories.

*Correlates to Common Core Standards in Language Arts in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 3-4.1; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 3-4.4, SL. 3-4.6.*

## Social Studies

Allow students to create their own immigrant experience at [tenementonline.org/immigrate/](http://tenementonline.org/immigrate/). After they have completed the exercise on the website, instruct them to write their story in a narrative form. Encourage them to use facts, but expressed with emotion. For example, how is their experience filled with fear and hope?

*Correlates to Common Core Standards in Language Arts in Reading Informational Text: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RI. 3-4.7; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-4.3; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 3-4.4; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 3-4.7.*

Have students read the history of the Pledge of Allegiance. Recite the words of the pledge that Rebecca may have learned in school in 1914. Then have students find out why the pledge was changed in 1923. ([www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm](http://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm)) Discuss why the words “my flag” may be confusing to new immigrants. Instruct students to write an essay titled “My Flag” that Ana or Rebecca might write for school. What information might they include about their home country? Have students read their essays aloud.

*Correlates to Common Core Standards in Language Arts in Reading Informational Text: Key Ideas & Details RI. 3-4.3; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 3-4.2; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 3-4.7; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3-4.1; Knowledge of Language L. 3-4.3; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 3-4.1.*

## Science and Health

Have students watch the video about the Ellis Island Hospital at the following website: [www.history.com/topics/immigration/the-ellis-island-hospital-video](http://www.history.com/topics/immigration/the-ellis-island-hospital-video). Trachoma, tuberculosis, diphtheria, and measles were among the contagious diseases treated. Divide the class into small groups and ask each group to research one of the diseases. They should find out the symptoms, isolation period, how the disease posed a public health problem, and whether the disease is still being treated in the United States today. Have the groups present their findings to the class.

*Correlates to Common Core Standards in Language Arts in Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 3-4.7; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 3-4.4, SL. 3-4.6.*

## Music and Drama

Irving Berlin was a first-generation Russian Jewish immigrant who became famous for writing “God Bless America,” “White Christmas,” and “Easter Parade.” He wrote more than 900 songs, Broadway musicals, and scores for movies. Students may read a short biography of Berlin at [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/berlin.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/berlin.html). Have students listen to some of his songs on CDs from the library or on YouTube.

*Correlates to Common Core Standards in Language Arts in Reading Informational Text: Key Ideas & Details RI. 3-4.1, RI. 3-4.3; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 3-4.1, SL. 3-4.2, SL. 3-4.3.*

Max performs in vaudeville shows. Have students read about vaudeville at this website: [www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/vaudeville/about-vaudeville/721/](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/vaudeville/about-vaudeville/721/). Students may also search for and view historical vaudeville footage on YouTube. Allow students to work with partners and plan a vaudeville act. Then have the class perform a vaudeville show for another class. Begin the performance with a brief introduction about vaudeville.

*Correlates to Common Core Standards in Language Arts in Reading Informational Text: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RI. 3-4.7; Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 3-4.7; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 3-4.1; Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 3-4.4.*

## Vocabulary/Use of Language

The vocabulary in the novel isn't difficult, but students should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context. Such words may include *sophisticated* (p. 22), *trousseau* (p. 23), *pungent* (p. 25), *consoled* (p. 27), *doily* (p. 30), *dismally* (p. 41), *demurely* (p. 44), *din* (p. 59), *melodic* (p. 95), *humiliated* (p. 96), and *infirmary* (p. 96). Some Yiddish and Russian words are used in the story. Encourage students to look up these words and their meanings in the glossary (p. 111).

*Correlates to Common Core Standards in Language Arts in Reading Literature: Craft & Structure RL. 3-4.4; Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 3-4.4, L. 3-4.4c.*

## Online Resources

- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVPQa-10030](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVPQa-10030)  
This 30-minute footage of *The Perils of Pauline* (1914), the movie that Rebecca wants to see, may interest students.
- [immigrants1900.weebly.com/index.html](http://immigrants1900.weebly.com/index.html)  
Illustrated with historical photos and film footage, this site discusses why immigrants left home, their Ellis Island experience, and the working and living conditions they faced when they arrived.
- [www.tenement.org](http://www.tenement.org)  
This is the official website for the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side of New York City, where Rebecca's stories take place.
- [www.laborarts.org/exhibits/thetrianglefire/2-the-clothing-industry.cfm](http://www.laborarts.org/exhibits/thetrianglefire/2-the-clothing-industry.cfm)  
This site includes a brief discussion and historic photos of sweatshops in the early 20th century and the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire of 1911.

## More Stories About Rebecca

- *Lights, Camera, Rebecca!*—Find out what happens after *The Sound of Applause*. (Lexile measure: 740L)

## About the Author



Jacqueline Dembar Greene used to read historical novels under an apple tree in her yard when she was a girl. She loved to imagine living in a more exciting time and place. While writing about Rebecca, Ms. Greene talked with friends and relatives who recalled their experiences growing up in the early 1900s. She also explored New York's Lower East Side and visited the neighborhoods in Rebecca's world. Ms. Greene lives in Massachusetts with her husband. When she isn't writing, she enjoys hiking, gardening, and traveling to visit her two adult sons.

## Key to Common Core Standards Referenced in This Guide

### Reading Literature

#### *Key Ideas & Details*

RL. 3-4.1—Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

RL. 3-4.3—Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.

#### *Craft & Structure*

RL. 3-4.4—Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text.

RL. 3-4.5—Describe the overall structure of a story, including describing how the beginning introduces the story and the ending concludes the action.

RL. 3-4.6—Acknowledge differences in the points of view of characters, including by speaking in a different voice for each character when reading dialogue aloud.

#### *Integration of Knowledge & Ideas*

RL. 3-4.7—Make connections between the text of a story and oral presentation of the text, identifying where each version reflects specific descriptions and directions in the text.

RL. 3-4.9—Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events.

### Reading Informational Text

#### *Key Ideas & Details*

RI. 3-4.1—Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

RI. 3-4.3—Describe the relationship between a series of historical events in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect.

#### *Integration of Knowledge & Ideas*

RI. 3-4.7—Use information gained from illustrations (e.g., maps, photographs) and the words in a text to demonstrate understanding of the text.

### Language

#### *Conventions of Standard English*

L. 3-4.1—Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

#### *Knowledge of Language*

L. 3-4.3—Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.

#### *Vocabulary Acquisition & Use*

L. 3-4.4—Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade-level reading and content.

L. 3-4.4c—Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.

L. 3-4.5a—Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meaning.

## Speaking & Listening

### *Comprehension & Collaboration*

SL. 3-4.1—Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade-level topics and texts with peers and adults in small and large groups.

SL. 3-4.2—Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.

SL. 3-4.3—Ask and answer questions about what a speaker says in order to clarify comprehension, gather additional information, or deepen understanding of a topic or issue.

### *Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas*

SL. 3-4.4—Tell a story or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking audibly in coherent sentences.

SL. 3-4.6—Speak in complete sentences when appropriate to task and situation in order to provide requested detail or clarification.

## Writing

### *Text Types & Purposes*

W. 3-4.1—Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons.

W. 3-4.2—Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

W. 3-4.3—Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events, using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequence.

### *Production & Distribution of Writing*

W. 3-4.4—With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task and purpose.

W. 3-4.5—With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, and editing.

### *Research to Build & Present Knowledge*

W. 3-4.7—Conduct short research projects that build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.

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## Characters That Teach

American Girl's line of historical fiction for middle-grade readers was originally conceived and developed by a former classroom teacher. These books and characters are grounded in thorough historical research and bring history to life for children.

Each historical character's story helps readers make connections. Girls and boys can explore the past, find their place in the present, and think about the possibilities the future can bring. They will see how a young person can stand up for what he or she cares about most: helping others, protecting the earth, and overcoming injustice. Through these stories, young readers will discover how staying true to their own beliefs helps define *their* character.

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