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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

Bread Givers
by
Anzia Yeziarska
(New York: Persea Books, 2003)

Author:

Anzia Yeziarska was born in a shtetl, probably Potosk, in Russian Poland and emigrated to the United States in 1890 when she was about eight years old. One of nine children in a very poor family headed by her father, a Talmudic scholar, she grew up in the Jewish ghetto on New York's Lower East Side. At the age of seventeen, against her father's will, Anzia Yeziarska left home and worked in sweatshops and laundries while going to school and then university. In 1915, she began to publish short stories about "her people," the Jews of the Lower East Side. Her first book, a collection of stories entitled *Hungry Hearts* (1922) was made into a Hollywood film. Its success brought Yeziarska wealth and fame. She went on to publish another collection of stories, *Children of Loneliness* (1923), and a succession of novels, including *Salome of the Tenements* (1922), *Bread Givers* (1925), *Arrogant Beggar* (1927), and *All I could Never Be* (1932). Then, in the 1940s and 1950s, her writing went out of vogue, and Yeziarska fell into poverty again. In 1950 she published her final book, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, a semi-fictional autobiography. Anzia Yeziarska died in 1970.

Since Persea's republication of *Bread Givers* in 1975, Anzia Yeziarska has been recognized as an important American author, and her work is now widely read. Persea also publishes all of Yeziarska's short stories in one volume, *How I Found America: Collected Stories*; her autobiography, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*; and a biographically arranged selection of her fiction, *The Open Cage*. [From the book jacket]

Summary:

Sara Smolinsky, the youngest daughter of an Orthodox rabbi, watches as her father marries off her sisters to men they don't love. "It says in the Torah, only through a man has a woman an existence," he proclaims. But Sara rejects this conception of Jewish womanhood. She wants to live for herself and to marry for love. "My will is as strong as yours," she replies. "Nobody can stop me. I'm not from the old country, I'm American!" Sara takes a job as an ironer and rents a room with a door. "This door was life...the bottom starting point of becoming a person."

Set during the 1920s on New York's Lower East Side, the story of Sara's struggle toward independence and self-fulfillment-through education, work, and love-is universal and resonates with a passionate intensity that all can share. [From the book jacket]

Questions:

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not?
2. How is the book structured? Does the author use any narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How did this affect your reading of the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it? For works of fiction, how do you think it might have been different if another character was telling the story?
3. Talk about the author's use of language and writing style. Have each member read his or her favorite passage out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) How does this particular passage relate to the story as a whole? Does it reveal anything specific about any of the characters or illuminate certain aspects of the story?
4. Talk about the time period in which the story is set. How well does the author convey the era? How important is the setting to the story? Is the author's description of the landscape/community a good one?
5. Does the author successfully draw you into the place and time depicted in this book? Why or why not? Did you find yourself totally immersed in the world of the characters, or were you unable to fully envision their lives and circumstances?
6. Did you learn anything new about the time period depicted in the book? What, if anything, surprised you?
7. Why does this book continue to appeal to modern-day readers? What timeless aspects of the story do you relate to?
8. Which characters did you find the most compelling and/or relatable and why? Are there any characters that seem to embody a kind of timelessness? For example, was there something about their manner or their views that felt modern or familiar?
9. Do you think this novel has had an impact on modern works? What facets of the author's style do you see echoed by today's writers? Are there any contemporary writers who succeed in modernizing elements of this author's style? Do these modern writers remain faithful to the technical and thematic characteristics that define the classic work?
10. Is this the first time you have read this classic book? If not, what new insights and observations have you discovered? Did you find this a pleasurable reading experience, or did it feel more like an assignment?

11. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book?
12. What did you like or dislike about the book that hasn't been discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Have you read other works by this author? If not, will you do so now?

[Questions from Reading Group Guides

<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/content/index.asp>]

Further Reading:

How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska. Anzia Yezierska. New York: Persea Books, 1991.

The Seventh Well. Fred Wander. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008.

Come with me to Babylon. Paul M. Levitt. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008.

A Mad Desire to Dance. Elie Wiesel. New York. Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.