

Bessie's Pillow

Teacher Resources for Middle School, High School, and College

Bessie's Pillow offers middle school and high school teachers and college professors a wonderful starting point for a wide variety of subjects and assignments in classes from social studies to American Literature, Women's Studies to Jewish studies.

Whether it's a class discussion about where people in America came from, a book report or a research paper, you can use *Bessie's Pillow* as the foundation.

In addition to the *Bessie's Pillow*, "[Bessie's America](#)," the interactive, multi-media guide to the movies, musicals, people and events that Bessie and her family experienced, provides further background for research.

Use the complete multi-media guide "[Bessie's America](#)" for links and information to expand students' knowledge of immigration, the Progressive Era, events, places, and the social history of Bessie and her family's life in New York and New Rochelle.

An abridged version of "Bessie's America" appears in copies of the book if purchased from the [Strong Learning Store](#) or with a purchase order. It is not included in the edition sold on Amazon and Barnes and Noble.

Use this teacher's guide to help your students explore the many themes in *Bessie's Pillow*.

Themes include: life and death, survival, romance, marriage, relationships, immigration, family, courage and resilience, Jewish immigrant life from 1904 to 1936, New York City and New Rochelle from 1904 to 1936, technology and life style changes in America (e.g. radio, movies, automobiles, entertainment, fashion), Progressive Era.

You can easily adapt the suggested questions and assignments to the grade, skills and abilities, and interests of your students.

Summary: In 1906 Boshka Markman leaves her family in Lithuania to sail to America and begin a new life. This historical novel, based on a true story, follows Bessie's (her American name) adaptation to life in New York and New Rochelle: her work, marriage, family, and her courage and resilience when tragedy strikes.

Characters (in order of appearance):

Bessie Markman Dreizen

Mamaleh (Bessie's mother)

Tateh (Bessie's father)

Bessie's brothers: Jack, Max, and two brothers who remained in Lithuania

David

Miriam Shapiro

Lou Shapiro

Nathan Dreizen

Bessie's children: Ann, Feggie, Al, and Selig

Discussion and essay questions:

1. Describe Bessie's relationship with her family in Lithuania and her ambivalence about leaving them. If you were in Bessie's shoes, would you have left home?

2. If you arrived in a strange city and didn't speak the language, what would you do?
3. Describe the changes that Bessie and her family experienced. For example, when Bessie arrived in America, few people had cars or trucks. So it was common to see horse-drawn carriages and wagons in the street. Not long after Bessie was married, Nathan purchased a truck for his business and then later an automobile.
4. What are the ways in which Bessie put her life back together after the children died? After Nathan died? Did she have other choices?
5. Why do you think Bessie disapproved of the Suffragists even though she wanted to vote and believed that women should vote?
6. How did living in New Rochelle help Bessie develop her sense of identity?
7. Compare and contrast Bessie's childhood in Glubokye to her children's life in New Rochelle.

Oral History and Life Stories:

1. Have students interview a woman who has immigrated to the United States. What similarities do they see with Bessie's experience? Use for a written report or a classroom presentation.
2. Let students discover their own history. Where did their family come from originally? Who were they? What did they do? Students can bring in pictures, documents, and mementoes to show the class during their presentations.

Using the book in an English class: Metaphor Analysis

1. ***The Pillow:*** In many ways, the pillow Bessie brings with her to America ties the story together. For Bessie, the pillow represents comfort, love, attachment, marriage and even loss.
2. ***Food:*** A pervasive theme throughout the novel involves choosing food, cooking, and eating. Food implies not only sustenance, but a way of holding onto the traditions of the old country and ethnic and religious identity.
3. ***Immigrant:*** More than the act of leaving one place to come to a new place, the word "immigrant" can imply such negative characteristics that the U.S. government passed anti-immigrant legislation in 1924.

These characteristics include being different, wearing "funny" clothes, speaking a foreign language, poverty, not understanding customs and traditions in America, being discriminated against, belonging to the "wrong" religion in country where the dominant religion is not only Christian but Protestant. Immigration is in the forefront again today. Do you think immigration should be restricted?

Using the book in a history class:

1. ***Immigration:*** Using the resources found in ["Bessie's America,"](#) research Eastern European immigration. Compare and contrast Irish or Italian immigration with Eastern European immigration. Why did these groups come to America? What did they do when they got here? How were they treated?

2. **Presidents and politics:** Research the major political changes that Bessie would see in her lifetime. Focus on the term or terms of one President, one New York governor or one New York City mayor. How did these changes influence Bessie and her family? ([See resources in "Bessie's America."](#))
3. **World War I:** How did World War 1 affect families like Bessie's?

Using the book in a social studies class:

1. **Health and disease:** Investigate the history of scarlet fever and the Spanish flu—two deadly diseases which impacted Bessie's family.
2. **Social and technological change:** Write a report on a social change that occurred during Bessie's lifetime (e.g. changing fashions, woman suffrage, prohibition, leisure activities)
3. **Entertainment:** Describe shows Bessie and her family saw on Broadway or in a Vaudeville theater, movies they went to, or radio shows they listened to. ([Use the resources in "Bessie's America."](#))
4. **Women's Roles:** Analyze traditional women's roles in general and in Judaism specifically. In what ways did Bessie follow traditional women's roles? In what ways did she go against them?

Term papers: Exploring the Voices of Immigration

Except for Native Americans, immigration and adaptation is the story of America, as Oscar Handlin so aptly put it—from the Pilgrims to recent immigrants from Mexico and Latin America.

The following suggestions give students the opportunity to explore immigration beyond Bessie's experience. To understand that even among Jewish immigrant women in New York, their experiences varied greatly.

These topics, in addition to being appropriate for American Studies, American Literature, American history, and immigration studies, also lend themselves to research for Women's Studies and Jewish Studies.

Women's Studies/Gender Studies:

1. Compare and contrast *Bessie's Pillow* with other novels and memoirs focusing on women immigrants and their families. Possible books include *Bread Givers* by Anzia Yezierska (Polish Jewish woman in NY), *Dakota Diaspora* by Sophie Trupin (Jewish homesteader in North Dakota), *My Antonia* by Willa Cather (Bohemian Catholic in Nebraska), *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant* by Marie Hall Ets (Italian Catholic in Chicago), *Elizabeth Street* by Laurie Fabiano (Italian Catholic in New York City), *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930* by Margaret Lynch-Brennan (Irish Catholics in various locations), *A Good American* by Alex George (German Protestant in Missouri), *In Her Place* by Shirley Schroeder (German Protestant in Wisconsin) Or encourage students to discover these books on their own. They'll find many novels, memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies about women

immigrants. What do these books tell us about gender roles?

2. Using the list above and other books students discover on their own, compare the immigrant experience in New York as experienced by Bessie and other large industrial cities to the immigrant homesteading experience in the plains states and the West. Students can choose from a large number of books about women immigrant homesteaders during Bessie's time. *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers* by Willa Cather and *Old Jules* and *Slogum House* by Marie Sandoz represent the most famous novels about pioneer immigrant families. These novels offer students a choice between literary analysis or historical investigation. For non-fiction, a good place to start is *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* by Lillian Schlissel.
3. Who was the New Woman of the Progressive Era? What did they do, who were they, what did they believe and support? Although Bessie would not have considered herself a "New Woman" and disagreed with their willingness to be in the public eye, can you see any of the characteristics of a "New Woman" in Bessie?

Jewish Studies:

1. Compare and contrast Bessie's Pillow with other stories of Jewish women immigrants. Books might include *Bread Givers* by Anzia Yezierska, *The Promised Land* by Mary Antin, *Dakota Diaspora* by Sophie Trupin, *Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains* by Rachel Calof, the women's stories in *My Future is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants*, edited by Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer.
2. Research the lives and influence of famous women Jewish immigrants (or daughters or granddaughters of immigrants) such as Rose Schneiderman, Lillian Wald, Hannah Solomon, Frances Jacobs, Gertrude Weil, Justine Wise Polier, Rebecca Gratz, and Ray Frank. Resources include ["Women of Valor"](#) and *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* by Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore. In what ways do you think Bessie might be considered a "woman of influence?"