

Grace Paley's "The Loudest Voice"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/grace-paleys-loudest-voice>.

Introduction

In Grace Paley's 1959 short story "The Loudest Voice," Shirley Abramowitz, a Jewish student in a public elementary school, is asked to be the narrator of her school's Christmas pageant. Shirley is excited about the opportunity, but her parents—Jewish immigrants who left Europe for a better life in New York City—disagree with each other about whether or not she should do it. In depicting American Jews trying to navigate the Christmas season, this story points to the many dilemmas faced by Jews and other immigrants living as minorities in America. Born in 1922, Paley herself was raised in New York by Jewish immigrant parents. In her relatively small body of work, mostly short stories and poems, Paley portrays the lives, loves, and languages of that milieu as well as any author ever has, making her a must-read writer for those studying the Jewish or multicultural American experience.

Subjects

Fiction, Immigration, New York, Parenting, United States, Women Writers

Reading and Background:

- Grace Paley's *Collected Stories*, which includes "The Loudest Voice," was published in 1994 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- The scholar of Yiddish and American Jewish literature Anita Norich wrote an excellent *short biography* of Paley for the Jewish Women's Archive.
- *Grace Paley: Collected Shorts*, a *documentary film* by Lilly Rivlin and Margaret Murphy, brings to life Paley's work as an author and an activist.

Resources

1: Letter to the editor of the Jewish Daily Forward, 1941.

This letter, published in Yiddish in the advice column of the *Forward* (*Forverts*), is a real-life representation of the dilemma presented in Paley's fictional story. For more than eighty years, Jewish immigrants turned to this column for help navigating the social, cultural, and ethical challenges of living in America.

Suggested activity: Read the letter aloud. Have students write their own response to the "Reader from the Bronx."

Source: Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 168-169.

2: Jewish Daily Forward editor's response, 1941.

Suggested activity: Read the editor's response and discuss. Was the editor right? Is his answer—is the question, for that matter—relevant today?

Source: Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 168-169.

3: Interview (1992) and audio (1998) excerpts, Grace Paley's voice.



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Grace Paley was admired for the voices she created for her characters. The people in Paley's stories speak with distinct and believable voices that are intimately connected to their time, place, and culture. In this excerpt from an interview with the literary journal *Paris Review*, Paley indicates that her writing style has been influenced by the Russian Jewish culture in which she was raised. The short audio clip of the author reading "The Loudest Voice" shows evidence of this influence.

Suggested activity: Read the *Paris Review* excerpt and listen to the audio clip. Ask students to listen for examples of how Paley's writing might be influenced by the language and "music" of her culture. Then listen to the clip again, this time for examples of how Paley's writing is specifically American. In both cases, have students point to specific word choices and sentence structures. This may lead to a broader discussion of how multiculturalism can influence and be depicted through fiction.

Sources: Jonathan Dee, Barbara Jones, and Larissa MacFarquhar, "Grace Paley, The Art of Fiction No. 131," *Paris Review*, No. 124, Fall 1992, accessed December 4, 2015, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2028/the-art-of-fiction-no-131-grace-paley>.

Grace Paley, *The Loudest Voice*, Vermont Public Radio, 1998, MP3, accessed December 4, 2015, http://www.vpr.net/news_detail/86644/vt-edition-grace-paley-reads-loudest-voice/.

4: Theater program cover from *The Melting Pot* by Israel Zangwill, 1908.

Israel Zangwill (1864-1926) was a British-Jewish writer, and one of the most well-known Jews of his time. His 1908 play popularized the term "melting pot" as a way to describe American society. The play's protagonist, a Jewish immigrant named David who survived but lost family members in the Kishinev pogroms, is writing a symphony that glorifies the erasure of ethnic difference and the emergence of a new American. For more information about the play and its history, read this short [article from the New York Times](#).

Suggested activity: Have students study the program cover image and free-write in response to it for 5 minutes. Then discuss: What is happening in this artwork? What feelings do the images evoke?

Source: *The Melting Pot* theater program cover, 1916, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections Department, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/ref/collection/tc/id/54844>.

5: Excerpt from *The Melting Pot* by Israel Zangwill, 1908.

Suggested activity: Read the excerpt aloud with students and discuss: Why is the metaphor of the "melting pot" compelling to some people? Why might others find it problematic? What is a good metaphor for your ideal American society?

Source: Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 36-37, accessed December 11, 2015, <https://books.google.com/books?id=XHwLAAAAIAAJ&pg=PR3#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

6: Oral history video excerpt, "An Assimilationist Impulse," 2012.

In this clip from the Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project, narrator Mark Gerstein remembers his family's attempts to assimilate into mainstream (non-Jewish) American culture, and also his mother's conflicted feelings about how this would look to other Jews.

Suggested activity: Watch and discuss the video with students. Then have students interview each other about their experiences and memories of the December holidays. For a larger project, have students plan, conduct, and record an interview with a parent, grandparent, or other family member on the topic. Review and discuss the basic principles of oral history with students before they begin their interviews. For tips on how to conduct an oral history interview, visit [this helpful page from the Library of Congress](#).

Source: Mark Gerstein, interview by Christa Whitney (Wexler Oral History Project, July 5, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDoFOXn5yoo>. For the complete interview with Gerstein: <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/oral-history/mark-gerstein>.