

Liana Finck's "A Bintel Brief: Love and Longing in Old New York"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/liana-fincks-bintel-brief-love-and-longing-old-new-york>.

Introduction

Cartoonist Liana Finck's *A Bintel Brief: Love and Longing in Old New York* (2014) is a graphic novel about a young woman who finds an old notebook filled with clippings from the Yiddish-language advice column, *A Bintel Brief*. Translated as "bundle of letters," this popular feature of the *Forverts* (also known as *The Jewish Daily Forward* in English) appeared in the socialist Yiddish newspaper for the first time in 1906, nine years after Abraham Cahan founded the paper. Readers would send letters to the editor asking for advice on everything from love to the challenges of immigration and assimilation. Finck's graphic novel intersperses a fantastical story about this narrator, who lives in current-day Manhattan and converses with the ghost of Cahan, with eleven letters from the original *Bintel Brief*, translated from Yiddish to English and from prose to comics.

This resource kit provides original letters to the editor and newspaper clippings, video clips, photographs, and an excerpt from another graphic novel to help students think about the history, context, and structure that frames Finck's powerful work of visual and verbal translation.

Subjects

Graphic Novels and Comics, Immigration, New York, United States, Women Writers, Yiddish

Reading and Background:

- Liana Finck's *A Bintel Brief: Love and Longing in Old New York* was published in 2014 by Ecco Press.
- For background on Liana Finck, see "Liana Finck: Yiddish Graphic Novelist" by John Marchese on the Yiddish Book Center's website, "Interview with Liana Finck" by Rachel Morgenstern-Clarren on *Words Without Borders*, and "A Bintel Brief: An Interview with Liana Finck" by Mikki Pugh on the Jewish Women's Archive website. For engaging audio interviews with Liana Finck about the graphic novel and her process more generally, listen to "Illustrating Letters to a Yiddish Advice Column," an episode of the Yiddish Book Center's podcast, and "Cartoonist Liana Finck Rides the Train to Nowhere," published by the *New Yorker Radio Hour* and posted on the WNYC website. See also Finck's *New Yorker* contributions, which include an illustrated modern-day advice column, Dear Pepper, or her popular Instagram account, @lianafinck, which includes a number of political cartoons. She was also recently interviewed for *The Believer* about her new memoir, *Passing for Human*.
- For a brief summary of the original *Bintel Brief*'s history as well as a selection of six letters and responses (from 1908 - 1945), see Jennifer Siegel's "A Community of Readers" (2007) published online in the *Forward*. A book-length selection of translated letters and responses from sixty years of *Bintel Brief* is collected in Isaac Metzker's edited volume, *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (1990); the editor's introduction in the book also provides a helpful background.
- A short biography of the founder and editor of the *Forverts* newspaper Abraham Cahan, reprinted with permission from *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, can be found in [this article](#) on *MyJewishLearning.com*; for a longer recent biography, see Seth Lipsky's *The Rise of Abraham Cahan* (2013).
- For a scholarly discussion of Finck's graphic novel, see the concluding chapter in "How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?": *Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs* (2016) by Tahneer Oksman.
- For background on another *Forverts* feature included in Finck's book, "The Gallery of Missing Husbands," see "Di Farshvundene Mener and Agunes: The National Desertion Bureau in New York City" on Mapping Yiddish New York: A Columbia University Project (Oct. 4, 2017).
- For useful resources on how to read comics and graphic novels, consider Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994)



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and Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (2008).

Resources

1: Letter to the editor of the "Jewish Daily Forward," 1914.

Here is a letter to the editor, originally published in Yiddish, from the original *Bintel Brief* column. "A Faithful Reader" writes to the editor, asking for advice in the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire (and the loss of her bridegroom). In 1911, a fire devastated the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, which was located in the Asch Building in Greenwich Village, Manhattan. The doors of the factory were locked from the outside, and 146 people trapped inside were killed in the fire. They were mostly young Italian and Jewish immigrant women. Public outcry in response to the tragedy brought attention to the unsafe and unethical working conditions in factories. It led to a number of lawsuits against the factory owners and to the proposal and implementation of legislation to improve working conditions.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the letter out loud. Ask if they can summarize, in two or three sentences, the story of the letter and what advice is being sought. Have them share and compare these summaries.

Next, ask students to return to the letter and read it carefully to themselves, paying special attention to mood and tone. What have they learned about the letter-writer based on the language that she uses? Are there words or images that stand out? See if they can create a list of words or phrases that describe the letter-writer, the setting, and the emotions behind the letter. Encourage students to jot down shapes or drawings that encapsulate the words and phrases they have listed. If you have materials available, you can ask students to create collages, illustrations, or visual maps to represent the story of the letter. (Note: if they are drawing, you should encourage them to use whatever style is most comfortable for them—including stick figures. The point is not to draw in a particular or realistic way, but to try to capture the tone, mood, and storyline of the letter in images and words.)

Source: Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (Doubleday, 1971), 129-131. Reproduced by permission of Black Star Publishing.

2: Response from the editor of the Jewish Daily Forward, 1914, and photograph of Abraham Cahan.

Here is the original editor's response to the letter in resource 1 of this kit. As Abraham Cahan wrote in his autobiography, for the first couple of years of *Bintel Brief*, he answered all of the letters himself. Though later the feature ran with the help of others, the figure of the imagined editor continued to be, as Seth Lipsky has described it, a "sympathetic, seasoned voice, an enlightened cousin who had been in America just that much longer and could serve as a guide to the country's strange ways" (*The Rise of Abraham Cahan* 85).

Suggested Activity: After students have read the letter in resource 1, but before they read the editor's response, have them draft their own response to the letter. What would they have said to this woman, if they had received her letter?

Then have students read the editor's response. Do any of their responses match? Do they think that this editor's response was a helpful one? Why or why not? How do they understand the editor, the editor's role, and the function of the *Bintel Brief* column more generally, based on this response?

Finally, have students study the photograph of Abraham Cahan. Ask them to go into as much detail as they can to describe what they see. What words come to mind when they look at the photograph? Does looking at the photograph change the way they think about the role of the editor, or of *Bintel Brief* more broadly?

Sources: Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (Doubleday, 1971), 129-131. Reproduced by permission of Black Star Publishing.

Abraham Cahan, half-length portrait, looking down at printed material on desk / World Telegram & Sun photo. 1937. Photograph. *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, New York. From: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <https://www.loc.gov/item/97518250/>.

4: Oral history excerpt, Dora Maisler, Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire survivor, 1957.

In this excerpt, we hear a former garment worker and survivor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire talk about her experiences. Dora Maisler, a sample-maker working on the eighth floor of the Asch Building, describes the fire, her life afterwards, and memorializing the victims. Maisler's interview, like oral history more broadly, offers the unique perspective and insight of a first-person account.

Suggested Activity: Have students listen to the oral history excerpt. Ask them to jot down notes as they listen. What have they learned about the experience from hearing the survivor's testimony? What details stood out to them? What did they think about the interviewers' questions and reactions throughout the interview? What role did the interviewers seem to play?

Invite students to look at the excerpt from Finck's graphic novel in resource 3, and remind them that it is a fictionalized drawing based on an original, translated *Bintel Brief* letter. Ask them to think about what the different versions of the story teach us about the history. Is there something that the graphic novel highlights about early twentieth century immigrant history more broadly, or the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire more specifically, that the oral history does not (and vice versa)? Have students think about different forms of historical recording. Ask them to consider the limitations and uses of each particular historical mode.

Sources: Dora Maisler, interview by Sigmund Arywitz and unidentified woman, 1957 (Survival Oral Histories, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives, Cornell University), <https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/survivorInterviews/DoraMaisler.html>.

5: Newspaper excerpt, "Gallery of Missing Husbands," *Forverts*, December 10, 1913, and excerpts from Liana Finck's "A Bintel Brief," 2014.

The mass migration of Jews to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often meant that families were broken apart for a period of time, a circumstance that led to many emotional and material difficulties. One of the most troubling situations was when a spouse (usually a husband) moved to America in advance of his family and then simply "disappeared." For any number of reasons, many men used the separation as an opportunity to start over, abandoning their families.

This phenomenon became so widespread that the *Forverts* published a regular feature dedicated to it: "A *Galerie fun Farshvundene Mener*," or "A Gallery of Missing Husbands." Photographs of the missing men would be posted in the newspaper with descriptions that included information like their age, their place of birth, their job or trade, the date and location of their disappearance, and a list of family members that they left behind. [The Teach Great Jewish Books resource kit by Jessica Kirzane on *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*](#), a novella by Abraham Cahan, also explores the phenomenon of "A Gallery of Missing Husbands." That kit provides a translation for the headline above the photographs that reads, "A *galerye fun fershvundene mener - Oyb ihr derkent zey, un veyst vu zey zaynen, lozt visn zeyere froyen durkh'n 'forverts'*" ("A Gallery of Missing Husbands - If you recognize them, and know where they are, let their wives know through the *Forverts*.")

In Liana Finck's graphic novel, *A Bintel Brief*, there is a separate, stand-alone chapter between chapters eight and nine, titled "Gallery of Missing Husbands." The chapter includes ten full-page black-and-white etchings, portraits that the artist sketched based on original photographs from the *Forverts* archive. Each sketch includes the first name and age of the person featured in the image.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to look first at the original newspaper photographs and text alone, and to discuss what they think this feature's purpose was. Have them carefully examine both the wording and the way the photographs are presented on the page. If they are familiar with *A Bintel Brief*, ask them what they think the relationship between the two newspaper features ("Gallery of Missing Husbands" and *Bintel Brief*) might have been. How does this feature speak to the role that the *Forverts* played at the time in the Jewish community? Is there any newspaper, magazine, website, or other form of media that plays a similar role for immigrants today? Or a comparable role for Jews?

Students should then select one of the photographs and write a *Bintel Brief*-style letter from the perspective of the missing person. Ask them to think about reasons that the person might be missing—why he may have essentially "ghosted" his wife and family—and whether they feel sympathetic to any of those reasons. If there is time, you might also have them pen an editor's reply.

Finally, have students compare the photographs in the original *Forverts* feature with the images from Finck's graphic novel. What differences are there in looking at the photograph versus the images? Why would Finck have chosen to include illustrations in her graphic novel, instead of the original photographs? Does looking at the drawn images change the way that the students have been thinking about the "missing person" perspective?

Sources: Anonymous, "*A galerye fun fershvundene mener*" (New York: *Forverts*, December 10, 1913). Digitized by the Historical Jewish Press (JPress) project of the National Library of Israel and Tel Aviv University.

Two pages from "The Gallery of Missing Husbands" from A BINTEL BRIEF: LOVE AND LONGING IN OLD NEW YORK by LIANA FINCK. Copyright (c) 2014 by Liana Finck. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publisher.

6: Video clip, "A Look Inside Lower East Side Tenement Museum," 2013.

The Tenement Museum, a building with preserved apartments located on historic Orchard Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, was created to help visitors get a sense of what life was like in the tenements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The museum was founded by Ruth J. Abram and Anita Jacobson in 1988, and it is a National Historic Landmark. The video clip presented here provides background and information about the museum, showcasing some of its installations. In the video, historian and educator Annie Polland says that the mission of the museum is "to engage people in the power of the past to make them think about the present," something that Liana Finck's graphic novel, with its mix of narratives from both the past and an imagined present, works to do as well.

Suggested Activity: Have students watch the video (focusing on 00:00-02:53) and take notes on what they see and what they hear. Ask them to think about what information they learn from watching the video, and how it might be different to actually visit the museum. What might they discover from entering into a home that has been preserved from the past? How might learning about the past through a visit to a museum like this be different from reading about it in a graphic novel? Have them also think about the people behind the scenes, including educators, curators, and tour guides, who are involved in presenting the museum exhibits. How does their involvement change or shape a visitor's experience of the museum?

Students should then take out a piece of paper and think about a room in their own homes that has a lot of meaning for them. Give them time to sketch out an illustration of this room in as much detail as possible. Ask them to engage as many of their senses as they can (sight, smell, touch, sound, and taste, if relevant). You might have them write out a description of the place as well, or simply present their sketch to the class. What do we learn about the inhabitants of this room from this illustration? Are there remnants from the distant past integrated into the present-day setting? How does the illustration you created compare to the room in resource 3 from Liana Finck's graphic novel?

Source: Tenement Museum, "A Look Inside Lower East Side Tenement Museum." Posted June 6, 2013.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HB7Kim2qYBE&_ga=2.25049528.309867814.1525982417-1955471365.1525982417