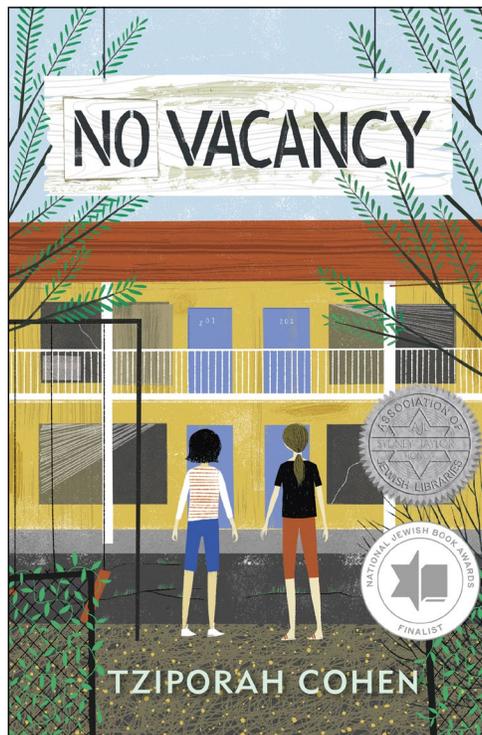




GROUNDWOOD STUDY GUIDES

No Vacancy

Written by
Tziporah Cohen



With the help of her Catholic friend, an eleven-year-old Jewish girl creates a provocative local tourist attraction to save her family's failing motel.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Ages 9 to 12 / Grades 4 to 7

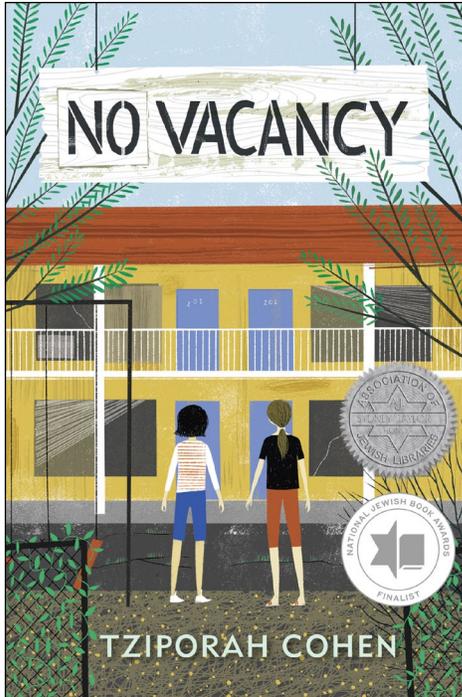
JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Prejudice & Racism/ Heritage and Identity / Family & Community.

5 x 7.5 / 224 pages

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

Buying and moving into the run-down Jewel Motor Inn in upstate New York wasn't eleven-year-old Miriam Brockman's dream, but at least it's an adventure. Miriam befriends Kate, whose grandmother owns the diner next door, and finds comfort in the company of Maria, the motel's housekeeper, and her Uncle Mordy, who comes to help out for the summer. She spends her free time helping Kate's grandmother make her famous grape pies and begins to face her fears by taking swimming lessons in the motel's pool.

But when it becomes clear that only a miracle is going to save the Jewel from bankruptcy, Jewish Miriam and Catholic Kate decide to create their own. Otherwise, the No Vacancy sign will come down for good, and Miriam will lose the life she's worked so hard to build.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

The title of this book is *No Vacancy*. What do you imagine when you hear these words? What does this phrase mean? Where do you most often see these words?

Looking at the cover of the book, what do you see? Imagine you are a detective: using only clues from the cover, deduce what kind of place you think this story will occur in? What does that place look, feel, sound and smell like? Who will this story be about?

How would you define a miracle in your own words? Have you ever experienced one? Do you believe in them? Why or why not?

POST-READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

TAKING RISKS

Miriam's parents decide to move and buy the Jewel Motor Inn despite having no previous experience with hotel management. Why do you think they might have made this decision? Do you think it was a wise choice? Why or why not? How does it turn out for them in the end? What are the pros and cons of taking risks in life? What kinds of risks do you take in your own life?

Write a story about a time you took a risk without adequate knowledge or experience. How did it turn out for you? Looking back, would you take the same risk again? Why or why not?

FAITH AND RELIGION

Miriam's family is Jewish, Kate's family is Christian. For both families, faith is an important part of their lives. How do we know this? What do you notice about the role religious faith plays in this story? How does this surprise you?

What role does faith play in your life? In what ways is it important to you? In what ways is faith important to your friends and their families? Do you find it difficult to talk about faith and religion? Why or why not?

BRIDGING DIFFERENCES

Miriam and Kate become friends despite their religious differences. Yet they do so without ignoring their differences or trying to pretend they aren't there. In return, they both learn about one another's lives and faith through each other. What do you learn about faith and religion through them? How do people in this story show love and respect for one another across the differences that could otherwise divide them?

Do you have a friend like Kate or Miriam, a friend who is different than you but who has made your life richer? The world is full of many stories of hate and discrimination between people of different cultures and religions. Try to write a story for your local newspaper on what you have learned about life or the world by having a friend with a different background than you. To do this, first find out how to submit a story to your local newsletter, and how long the story should be—you can usually find this information on their website or by emailing them. They may or may not print your story, but it's exciting to go through the process of submitting!

CHALLAH BAKING

Challah is one of the most universal food items in Jewish cuisine and, accordingly, is a staple of Miriam’s family’s observance of the Shabbat meal. The taste and act of baking challah reminds Miriam of her past and helps her feel at home in her new life; sharing it with her neighbors is also a practical way she shows hospitality and kindness. What foods are special in your family or make you feel at home?

Research online how to bake challah and bake two loaves—the customary number Jewish families make for the Shabbat meal. If you want, share a loaf with friends or neighbors like Miriam did.

Alternatively, you could learn how to bake a grape pie and share it with others, just as Kate’s grandma did.

LIFE IS NOT WHAT HAPPENS TO US

In the sermon Miriam listens to at synagogue, the rabbi says that “[l]ife is not simply what happens to us. Life is what we do with what happens to us.” What do you think she means by this? What did Miriam and Kate do with the circumstances they were given, the failing motel?

How would you apply this quotation to your own life? Can you think of a time you moved beyond mere circumstances to do something about them? What is one small thing you can do with your life now to live more fully or show love to those around you?

Write a poem inspired by this quotation to hopefully inspire yourself or others that even when life seems out of our control, we always have choices to make about what we do with it.

BAD OR GOOD?

When Miriam and Kate go to the drive-in theater to see the apparition, Miriam wonders:

Is what we did bad or good? Yes, we fooled people, but if it makes them happy and gives them hope and saves the motel and the diner, is that so bad?

What do you think? Was their creation of a fake apparition good, bad or somewhere in between? Why?

Pretend that Miriam is a friend and has written you a letter asking for your opinion, asking you these questions. Write a letter responding to her with your thoughts and advice.

WHAT IS A MIRACLE?

What miracle(s) happened in this story? How did Miriam's understanding of miracles change or stay the same throughout the story?

Before reading this story, you were asked to consider what a miracle is. How has your thinking about miracles changed or stayed the same by reading this story?

Often we think of miracles as things that happen randomly, without our control or involvement. Yet the miracles that happen in this book all required some form of participation from people. People only noticed the apparition after Miriam and Kate cut a cross in the movie screen, for example, and Miriam had to do something that frightened her to save her brother. Do you think this makes the miracles more or less miraculous? Why?

Write a story, draw a picture or in some other way re-create your choice of one of the miracles from this book, or a miracle you yourself have gotten to experience in your own life.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Tziporah (Tzippy) Cohen studied French and theater arts at Cornell University, where she was one of a handful of chimes masters who performed concerts in the campus bell tower. Many years after graduating from Harvard Medical School, she received an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She now splits her time between writing and working as an oncology/palliative care psychiatrist.