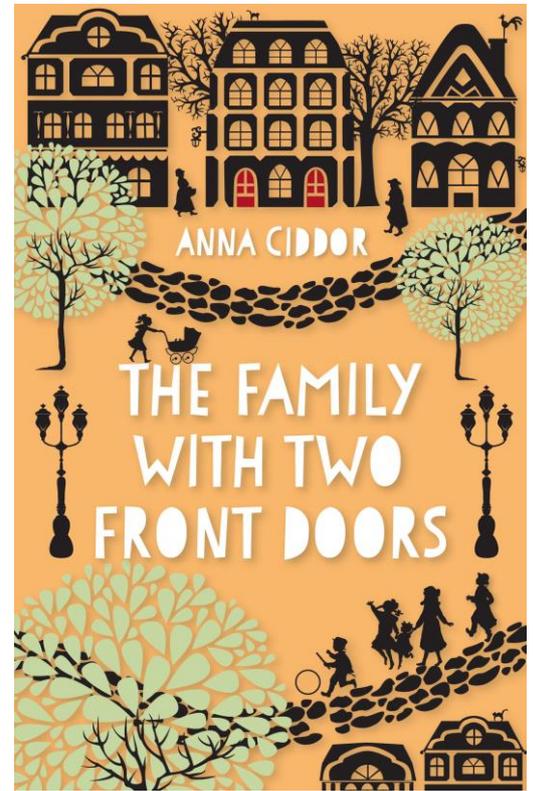


The Family with Two Front Doors

By Anna Ciddor

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Summary

The Family with Two Front Doors is based on a real family of nine children who had the most extraordinary life. They lived in the Jewish quarter of Lublin, Poland, in the 1920s. This was long before the Second World War so it is not a Holocaust story. It is a heart-warming story. Every moment of these children's lives was filled with colour and adventure, intriguing rituals and customs. But the biggest adventure of all was when big sister Adina was told she had to be married at the age of fifteen – to someone she had never met.

The thread running through the book is Adina's forthcoming marriage, but from the beginning we are pitched straight into the everyday lives of the family. We join them for breakfast, and listen to the samovar bubbling while ten-year-old Nomi trails her long hair in a bowl of oily herrings and baby Bluma drops soggy, chewed bagel on the floor. We go shopping with them at the market, and watch eight-year-old Yakov struggle to carry home a huge fish. We stand next to them in the hallway on Beggars' Thursday, and help them hand out food and coins to the stream of beggars who come in through the open front door. We gasp in consternation as a group of louts throw stones at them because of their different appearance and religion, then watch as Yakov snatches up the stones and throws them back. Day by interesting day we follow the lives of the family, until at last we reach the grand finale of Adina's wedding.

The Family with Two Front Doors provides a fascinating insight into Jewish culture. It prompts us to think about the expectations a society imposes on us depending on our gender or religion, what challenges and responsibilities we take on, and how we should deal with prejudice. Finally, the author's note at the end gives a glimpse of what will happen to the family in the Holocaust, and brings home to us that every stranger who dies in a genocide or other tragedy is not a statistic but a unique and precious individual.

Use in the curriculum

- Suitable for ages 8-13
- Relevant related activities could include further research into Judaism and other religions
- Raises several themes for discussion, including prejudice and gender differences
- Ideal for the study of using factual events as the basis for a fictional story

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Contact Carolyn Walsh, Education Marketing Coordinator,
Ph: +02 8425 0150 Fax: 02 9906 2218 Email: CarolynW@allenandunwin.com

- Ideal for making connections between students' own experiences and those of characters and events from a different historical, social and cultural context
- Ideal for studying how text structures can create different points of view
- Ideal for practice with decoding unfamiliar words using phonic and contextual knowledge
- Makes a great companion for a book about another culture, such as Ruth Starke's *Noodle Pie* about modern Vietnamese rituals and customs or the *Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder about life in the American West in the nineteenth century.

Discussion questions

1. Before commencing the book, discuss as a class what impressions, preconceptions and knowledge you have about the term 'Jew'. Note down the answers for future reference. Cover topics such as food, clothes, language, and religious rituals, but also include what feelings and impressions the word evokes. Have you heard it used as a swear word or derogatory term? Do you think of a Jew as someone who would be very different from yourselves?
2. During and after the reading of the book, compare the knowledge gained about Jews with the original comments above.
3. Jewish readers, what are your reactions to reading this story based on the life of a religious Jewish family? How do you feel about non-Jewish people reading it? What impact do you think this might have on them?
4. '...the boy stared back, pulling a face. 'Yid,' he growled.
'Goy,' Yakov retorted promptly.
'Don't be rude, Yakov,' Adina scolded
'He was rude to me!'
'That's no reason to be rude, too.'
'Yes it is,' Yakov muttered. If someone insulted him just because he was Jewish, he was going to stand up for himself, no matter what Adina said.' (p 11)
Who was right, Adina or Yakov? What causes anti-Semitism and other prejudice? What could be done to combat it? How would you react if you saw someone insulting another person because of race or religion? Have you ever experienced prejudice based on religion, ethnicity or physical appearance? Has the media played a role in this?
5. Words from three foreign languages (Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish) are used in the book. Their meanings can be deduced from the context, but they are also explained in the glossary. Why do you think the author included these words? Is their use effective? Do you think the glossary is helpful or unnecessary?
6. The story has an unusually large cast of characters, including the nine children in the family. It was a difficult writing challenge for the author to make each character distinct. What techniques has she used?
7. Changing points of view are an important feature of the book. Some chapters are told through the eyes of eight-year-old Yakov, and some through the eyes of his sister, ten-year-old Nomi. The book begins with the author telling the story from her perspective, but part way through chapter two we start to see the world through Yakov's eyes. Can you detect when this happens? How does the author create these different points of view without using labels and headings? Can you find examples of Nomi and Yakov's different attitudes to things?
8. Apart from the use of foreign words, how does the author convey the cultural and historical setting of a Jewish home in 1920s Poland?

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Discussion questions (continued)

9. "And what about the groom?" asked Miriam. "When do you meet him?"
Adina scraped more soap shavings into the water and swirled them around
'I won't meet Mordechai till the wedding,' she answered. 'Aaron didn't see Yochevet till they got married. That's the way it is done.'
Nomi stared at her, horrified. 'But you might not like him. He might be mean. Or really old.'
Miriam clattered forks into the washing-up bowl. 'I'm not going to marry someone I've never met,' she declared. 'This is the 1920s!'" (p 17)
If your parents said they were arranging a marriage for you, would you react like Miriam or like Adina? Why do you think Adina accepts the situation?
10. How does the author make the book a fun and enchanting read rather than sounding like an information text about Judaism even though it contains details of Jewish ritual and customs?
11. 'Smiling with anticipation, Nomi dipped in her hand and felt around in the sawdust. Her fingers closed on something delicate and spiky and she drew it out. It was the bracelet of golden vine leaves entwined with tiny ruby flowers.' (p 57)
Do you enjoy the poetic (and occasionally challenging) vocabulary the author has chosen or do think she should have used a simpler writing style?
12. This book is based on the childhood of the author's grandmother. Interview your own parents and grandparents about their past. What aspects of their lives would make an interesting story?
13. In the world described in the book, girls and boys have very different roles and responsibilities. How does this compare with our society? Do you think girls and boys should be brought up to have different roles and expectations?
14. Although the Rabinovitch family live in Poland they speak their own language and live in a Jewish quarter with people who follow the same religious customs. Why do you think they do this? Do you think that people who have different ethnic or religious backgrounds from the general population should make an effort to maintain their traditions? If so, how should they do this?
15. Would you like to be part of the Rabinovitch household? Why – or why not? What are the good and bad aspects of the children's lives?
16. In *The Family with Two Front Doors* each child has special duties and responsibilities. Do you have any responsibilities in your family life or in other areas? Would you like to?
17. If you are part of a religious community that is not Jewish, compare your rituals and customs to the ones described in the book. What are the similarities and differences?
18. Read the description of the Friday night Sabbath meal in Chapter 10 then create a narrative based on your own experience of a festive meal.