

Bee season

Life



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The story of " Bee Season" is focused on an apparently warm home which will prove to be in fact a mere holding pen for four individuals spinning in completely separate universes. It is the kaleidoscopic portrait of a modern American family whose picture-perfect surface conceals an underlying world of secret turmoil.

The focal center of the novel is Eliza Naumann, the nine-year-old student who discovers that she has a talent for competitive spelling. Although the book is set in the competitive world of spelling bees, the contest is just one of the many plot devices in this family drama.

On the surface, the Naumann family appears to be ideal - upper middle-class, highly accomplished, deeply spiritual, and seemingly tightly knit. But it will gradually reveal that the picture-perfect family is, in fact, comprised of individuals on disparate (and often desperate) paths toward their own notions of transcendence - quests that lead them to pursue intense and even dangerous spiritual experiences. Eliza's unlikely emergence has the effect of tearing the fragile fabric that has thus far held them together. The plot examines faith, spirituality and what happens to a family's own belief system when changes occur.

Eliza was " a student from whom great things should not be expected"; thus when Eliza is forced to compete in her first spelling bee, she is certain that this event, like so many others, exists only to " confirm, display or amplify her mediocrity. " Yet when the words start coming, she realizes she can not only spell the words directed at her but, as if by magic, everyone else's words as well. She wins the school's contest, and then a few district and regional ones, before heading to Washington for the national bee.

Her father Saul, the cantor at Beth Simcha synagogue, sees Eliza's skills and begins training her for spelling competitions and for greater, more spiritual challenges ahead. Saul's obsessive attention to Eliza comes at the expense of her older brother Aaron, who is being bullied at school and who feels his own religious aspirations, closely modeled on his father's, unfulfilled. Miriam is the Naumann wife and mother, who's already pronounced remoteness from her husband and children, grows apace while Eliza and Saul are sequestered in his study, poring over dictionaries.

Apparently, like most families, the Naumanns seem to have settled comfortably into a routine, each member playing an accepted role in the day-to-day family drama. Saul is the family anchor, preparing the meals, running the household, and nurturing his son Aaron's interest in Judaism. Miriam, a brilliant high-powered lawyer, with a voracious intellect and a compulsion toward order slips easily into the role of wage-earner, happy to leave the emotional demands of family life and parenting to her husband. Aaron is the smart, socially isolated, and physically awkward teenager who thrives under his father's attention.

Amid this dazzling display of intellectual power and intensity, Eliza, an unremarkable student, is resigned to remaining in the shadows. She's among those sad-sack C students who " never get picked for Student of the Week" and " never get chased by boys at recess. " While other kids are singled out for gifted-and-talented programs, Eliza is shuffled off into classrooms where the walls are covered with posters of kittens dangling from ropes above slogans like " Hang in there" and " If at first you don't succeed. . . ." Even her mother considers her " a gosling born into a family of ducks.

" But her surprising triumph launches Eliza into the spotlight, radically altering the family dynamics. Through her success in the contest she becomes her father's protege, thus taking the place of her brother, in which point the fragile equilibrium of forces in the family is shattered. The image of perfect consensus is changed as Eliza's new discovered talent places her in the center of her father's preoccupations. It propels her from the ignominy of being an ordinary pupil to the triumph of shining in local, state, and national spelling competitions.

Because she can spell — intuitively, hypnotized by the combining and recombining letters — she replaces her older brother Aaron in the attentions of their cantor. In considering the composition of the action, which for much of its part takes place inside the characters' hearts and minds, winning the contest represents the crucial element that triggered the demise of the equilibrium that was apparent in the Naumanns house. By shattering the image of harmony and consensus the proof of parallel existences emerged for each member of the family.

Eliza, when replacing her brother in her father's perception, destroyed the silent consensus that ordered their lives up until then. From that moment, her family would grow apart. Thus, more realities surface in perceiving her family. The myth of the perfect family falls to pieces. Faced with a sudden change and forced by the circumstances to adapt to the new situation, each of the characters would show that their personality has a three dimensional development. Therefore, each of them is portrayed in three circumstances: in relation with his own self, with his family and in connection to the outside world.

In dealing with the new reality, the characters receive a multiple perspective for analysis. On the one hand, there is Miriam, Eliza's mother. Her character, defined by the three dimensions of her life, seems quite contradictory. In relation to the outside world, she is a brilliant, long hours working lawyer. In a slightly opposing image is her attitude which unfolds in relation with the other members of her family. It is obvious that her children baffle her; she is so uncomfortable with them that when one of them asks her about the boyfriends she'd had before marriage, she blushes.

" She wishes there were a book on the subject, slim as it would be, a 'Mother's Dating Life' she could substitute for conversation in the tidy manner of 'Where Do Babies Come From? " In the relationship with Saul she is a complex yet mysteriously troubled wife. She always saw him as the man who talked about fixing the world, " restore what had been shattered" and she thought he could heal her. Social exchange theory explains the relationship with another person as depending on the perception of the balance between giving and receiving.

The fact that Miriam never felt saved by her husband, that her expectations were unanswered and somewhat betrayed can explained the estranged connection and the unspoken sadness between them. She finds Eliza and Saul's shared focus on studying with their father a painful reminder of the connection she once had with her husband and her own parents, who died tragically when she was a young girl. The sudden discovery of her daughter's ability to apply the concentration and the desire for perfection that define her own self-image triggers a flood of contradictory emotions and sends her life spiraling out of control.

Always emotionally absent, she falls deeper into her secret life of petty theft, thus revealing her most hidden side. Therefore, a central theme for Miriam becomes the kaleidoscope from her childhood that she brings to Eliza. The kaleidoscope is important to Miriam because it is a device that gathers shards together and no matter their movement, they stay together. When Miriam gives the kaleidoscope to Eliza after the spelling bee she wants to share an important and precious secret of how to survive.

Secondly, there is Aaron who is defined through the social relationship as facing typical teenager problems; inside the family his father's attention is a guiding light in his pursuit of becoming an eminent rabbi. When this place is taken by Eliza and he is exiled from his father's inner sanctum of Jewish music and Hebrew learning, he seeks out other forms of spirituality than the Naumanns' Judaism. Formerly his father's assistant at the synagogue, he comes to see the family as an encumbrance for reaching perfection.

Exploring his spiritual needs he hungers for his own means of transcendence and he finds a community of Hare Krishnas, who's chanting, rituals, and self-abnegation appeal to his need for a warm community, near to God and thus detaching himself from the family. Yet, the center element of the novel is the developing relation between Eliza and her father. At a first glance, Saul is the distracted father, who spends most of his time in his study, researching forms of Jewish mysticism and worrying about the transcendence he'll never achieve.

His relationship with his daughter was mostly based on her achievements at school and the image depicted by those, therefore he could not have taken

her into consideration, as “ he only learns of his daughter's exclusion through one of his congregants who, after Shabbat services, announces loudly enough for the people on the other side of the cookie table to overhear that her son has been identified as Talented and Gifted”. Thus, his attention was focused on Aaron because “ Eliza hasn't tendered Saul the congratulatory note Aaron delivered at her age, the one that made Saul feel like a sweepstakes winner”.

But when Elisa wins the spelling bee, he begins to take notice of her. Motivating her talent as having religious connections, Saul sees something Kabbalistic in the way Eliza can intuit spelling words by having the letters fall into place all on their own -- a hint of a talent far beyond his own abilities. As they practice together for the national spelling competition, he leads her carefully through an old Jewish mystical text and toward a state of biblioglossic transcendence in which the alphabet begins to crack open and reveal a hint of the light of God.

He feels that Eliza is breaking through the illusion of reality and getting closer to God - something he has wanted to do all his life. He begins to see Eliza as able to fulfill his own dreams of transcendence. The scenes with Eliza and the Abulafia exercises in the reading room were compelling for showing the crossing from the family perspective in which Saul is just happy father to a superior one in which he is trying to take Eliza into his personal spiritual quest. Their relationship transcends the ordinary world. He wants to be her spiritual teacher, but he doesn't see the effect on her and the family.

Throughout the novel, he sees his family as a means of achieving a higher goal, of transcendence to a superior apprehension of the world. And he sees

this possibility first in Aaron, then in Eliza, whom he considers to be “ pretty special”. In their house of closed doors, Eliza pursues her father's tutorials, as he directs her study for the spelling bees. First dictionaries, then incantatory repetitions of letters and combinations of letters, then initiation into the meditation of the medieval mystic Abraham Abulafia:

" Letters," Saul says. " Abulafia believed that, by concentrating on letters, the mind could loose itself from its shackles to commune with a presence greater than itself. " Do you mean," Eliza whispers, " that I'll be able to talk to God? " (pp. 172-73) She masters the techniques of mystic concentration: " She could feel the different vowels in her marrow, her bones chimes through which the letters blew" (p. 190). Then she surpasses her father's knowledge.

Alone with Abulafia she experiences a religious ecstasy that rips through her body and mind, with visions, pain, " crawling Sects and crashing waves" (p. 268), her own disembodied voice, " infinite human and animal possibilities" (p. 269). Possibly, she sees God: " the shape's face is every face ever formed" (p. 269); she feels herself disintegrate and return anew. In fact, the experience is for her a try to find a new place in the world, one which leads away both from the front stage reality of the spelling bees contests and from the hidden, back stage of his father’s personal quest.

In uniting the contemporary realistic tradition in which “ Bee Season” is written-the tangible world of cereal boxes, grade school hallways, kaleidoscopes, Friday night synagogue services-with an ancient discipline derived from wonder and longing for God, Goldberg has painted a original picture of the particular unhappiness experienced by one family as a result

of resistance to change. Bibliography Goldberg, Myla. Bee Season. New York: Anchor, 2001.