

RELIGION

Religion Summer Work

Carl Friedman. *The Shovel and the Loom: A Novel*. NY: Persea Books, 1996

To introduce some of the basic themes of Religion 9, this summer you will read *The Shovel and the Loom*. Set in the Netherlands in the early 1970s, this novel is narrated by the character Chaya, a 20 year old philosophy student who lives in Antwerp. Chaya's parents, originally from Germany, survived the Shoah (frequently referred to as the Holocaust) and immigrated to the Netherlands. Because her job at a florist's shop is not making Chaya enough money, she finds a job as a nanny for a Hasidic Jewish family. Though she is Jewish, she is not observant, making her very different from the Kalmans. As the story unfolds, we see Chaya's interest in and struggle with big philosophical and theological questions as she comes to better understand her parents, the Kalmans, and her own religious, cultural, and personal identity.

Assignment

1. Read and enjoy the novel. As you read the novel, make note of the characters introduced and major events of the novel.
2. Be prepared to discuss the following questions:
 - a. Choose one of the following characters – Mr. Apfelschnitt, Chaya's mother, Chaya's father, Mrs. Kalman, Mr. Kalman, the Concierge, Sophie. What is the character's role in the novel? What does s/he represent? What motivates or guides the character? What is the character's attitude toward Judaism, or, more generally, toward religion? According to the character, what does being Jewish mean?
 - b. Choose one of the major philosophical (about the nature of life, the world, why we exist) or theological (about the nature of God, religious identity, spirituality) themes that are presented in the novel. Some of these questions are explicitly articulated by the narrator, some are implicit. Why does this question interest you? How does the story explore or reflect this question? How do the characters directly or indirectly respond to this question?

It may be helpful to make notes on your reactions to the novel and responses to these questions. While no written work is assigned here (in the first week of Religion 9, students will write a Reflection Paper on the novel), you should be prepared to discuss the book and demonstrate that you have read it thoroughly and have reflected seriously on the questions posed.