

The Fixer by Bernard Malamud

Book Information

Bernard Malamud, The Fixer
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This winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award is the story of Yakov Bok, who is accused of murder as part of an anti-Semitic movement, but later becomes a hero.

Award: National Book Award/ Honors; Pulitzer Prize

Topics: Mysteries, Murder; People, Jewish; People, Misc./Other; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound

Main Characters

B. A. Bibikov the magistrate who tries to help Yakov
Gronfein a Jewish prisoner sent to spy on Yakov
Grubeshov the prosecuting attorney in Yakov's case
Marfa Golov Zhenia's mother; a wicked woman suspected in his death
Nikolai Lebedev a Christian anti-Semitic who is rescued in the street by Yakov
Shmuel Rabinovitch Yakov's father-in-law, a poor peddler
Tsar Nicholas the Second the Russian ruler
Yakov Bok a poor Russian Jewish handyman, or fixer, whose wife has left him and who leaves his poor village for Kiev; later he is arrested and accused of murder
Zhenia Golov the twelve-year-old Christian boy who is murdered
Zinaida Nikolaevna Nikolai Lebedev's daughter, who has a crippled leg

Vocabulary

canard a piece of false information put out as a hoax

Cossack a member of a national group of South Russia famous as horsemen and cavalymen
disconsolate hopelessly sad; utterly dejected
nefarious wicked or sinful
peculating embezzling money
peremptorily cannot be denied or refused
phylacteries two small square leather boxes containing slips of vellum on which are written portions of the Mosaic Law, worn by orthodox and conservative Jewish men at prayer, symbolizing the duty to obey the law
pogrom an organized massacre
samovar a Russian tea urn heated by charcoal burning slowly in an inner container
shtetl small Jewish town or village in Eastern Europe from the nineteenth century until World War II
Tsar or czar: the emperor of Russia

Synopsis

Yakov Bok is a Russian Jew living in a small shtetl in the early 1900s. His wife has left him, and he is tired of poverty, so he travels to Kiev to find a better life. Russian Jews are restricted in their movements and can only live in certain sections of the city. An anti-Semitic group there called the Black Hundreds Organization terrorizes the Jews.

Yakov sees a drunken man passed out in the street and fears the man will suffocate. He sees a Black Hundreds badge on him, but he decides to help him anyway. Meanwhile, the man's daughter appears, frantically searching for him. They carry the man home, and she tells Yakov to return the next day so her father can thank him properly. Yakov returns to the man's home and introduces himself using an assumed Christian name. The man, Nikolai Lebedev, offers Yakov a job painting and wallpapering an apartment. Because of the large sum of money offered, Yakov agrees. After the job is completed, Lebedev offers Yakov a job as the overseer at a brick factory he had recently inherited. The job includes a place to live, but it is in a section strictly off-limits to Jews. Yakov agrees.

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At the brick factory, Yakov discovers bricks are being stolen and puts an end to the larceny. Those involved are not fired, but they do harbor a grudge. Yakov is a capable overseer, and Lebedev is pleased. Then, however, a twelve-year-old boy is murdered, and the Black Hundreds accuse the Jews of performing a ritual killing to obtain Christian blood for religious uses. Yakov is arrested for the crime.

While imprisoned, Yakov continually proclaims his innocence. He points out flaws in their accusations and false beliefs about Jews. The magistrate tries to help him, but is undercut by the anti-Semitic prosecutor and the arresting officer, Colonel Bodyansky. Since Yakov will not confess to the crime, he is sent to prison to wait for the indictment.

Prison conditions are very bad, and Yakov is treated cruelly because he is a Jew. He spends two-and-a-half years in prison, most of it in solitary confinement before he is brought out for trial. His trial causes civil unrest. The magistrate who tried to help him is murdered. It is believed that the boy's mother and lover killed the boy. The evidence is strong, but the prosecutor only wants to believe that the Jew killed the boy. The authorities are unsure they can get Yakov convicted, so they try several strategies to make him break down and sign a confession. They poison him, they chain him to his cell wall, and they perform body searches on him up to six times a day. Still, Yakov proclaims his innocence. They promise to free him if he confesses, but he does not believe they will free a confessed murderer. Meanwhile, his wife visits, and Yakov agrees to be named the father of her illegitimate child.

On the day of the trial, as the Cossacks come to take him to the courthouse, the assistant warden tries to shoot Yakov. Yakov is saved by the prison guard who has been guarding him. Yakov is taken away from the prison in a carriage. On the way, a bomb explodes near the carriage. Yakov is not hurt, but a young Cossack loses part of his leg. Yakov has a vision of talking to Tsar Nicholas the Second and shooting him. Then he thinks about what he has learned from his hardships. He realizes that there is

no such thing as an unpolitical Jew in Russia. He cannot be passive and see his people and himself destroyed. There will be no freedom without a fight!

The story ends with Yakov being driven to his trial. The streets are lined with people. Some are Jews who weep for the bearded man in the carriage.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

How were the Jews in Russia treated in the early 1900s?

The Jews were forced to live in settlement areas called shtetls. They were not allowed to travel freely to find jobs, and many areas were off-limits to Jews. Organizations like the Black Hundreds terrorized the Jews much like the Ku Klux Klan did Blacks in the United States. Additionally, the government murdered thousands of Jews in pogroms, or organized killing raids.

Literary Analysis

Why were the Jewish people in Russia hated and persecuted?

Anti-Semites believed that Jews dominated the world and felt oppressed by them. They feared the Jews because they were different. Gentile Russians commonly believed many false rumors about the Jews, which added to the fear. Jews were believed to use Christian blood to bake the bread used during their religious holidays. They were believed to offer human sacrifices to God. They were called "Jesus killers," and it was believed they would all be condemned to eternal damnation because they did not accept Jesus as the Son of God. During this time period every minority in Russia was persecuted to distract the population from recognizing that the government officials were breaching the Russian Constitution.

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Inferential Comprehension

Why does Yakov overwhelmingly feel God is not watching over him?

He had lost both parents at a young age; he lived in orphans' homes; he lives a poor life; he married, but his childless wife ran away. He seems to have bad luck, which becomes worse with his choices leading up to his imprisonment. He is falsely accused of murder and harshly treated while in prison.

Constructing Meaning

Why doesn't Yakov confess to the murder even after he is offered his freedom?

He had not committed the crime, so he can not bring himself to confess under any circumstances. Although he is uneducated, Yakov is an intelligent man who knows anti-Semitic officials can not be trusted. He does not believe them when they say he will be freed if he confesses. It does not make sense to him. How can they set a murderer free? He also realizes that the slowness in bringing the indictment indicates the prosecutor has doubts about his ability to get Yakov convicted.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story is set in Russia in the early 1900s under the reign of Tsar Nicholas the Second. One of the most notorious characters in modern Russian history, Rasputin, was involved with Nicholas and his family.

Rasputin is a nickname which means "debauched one." Have the students research the Tsar and determine how Rasputin became such an influential figure in Nicholas's court. Who were the Bolshevik rulers who replaced Nicholas? Did conditions improve under the new regime?

Understanding Literary Features Ask the students to choose one theme found in the story, and have them support it either from the text or from historical research. Possible answers include: "stand up for what you believe is right," which Yakov did by insisting on his innocence and not giving in to the pressure to confess and "being a Jew in Russia in 1911 was difficult,"

which is supported by Yakov's life as a fixer in his village, the pogroms, and his treatment in prison.

Understanding Characterization Yakov Bok leaves his village because he wants a better life. He is tired of not earning a wage yet, during the time in Kiev when he is making money, he is not happy. After he is arrested and sent to prison, he dreams about returning and living in the poverty he had fled. Each time in prison when his living conditions deteriorates, he longs for even the poor level of treatment he had received before the change. Ask the students to describe the levels of deprivation he endures, starting from the poverty he leaves in his village. They should explain how suffering makes a person appreciate what he or she had believed to be unendurable before things got worse. Ask them how they might apply that philosophy to their own lives.

Recognizing Feelings Yakov suffered despair during his two-and-a-half year prison sentence, most of which he spent in solitary confinement. He tried to create routines and diversions to alleviate his hopeless feelings. In more recent times, many American prisoners of war in Vietnam spent years held captive in brutal conditions. They often developed coping strategies to prevent themselves from becoming insane. Have students keep a journal for a week, imagining themselves to be Yakov. What feelings might they experience? What methods of coping could they create to help maintain their sanity?