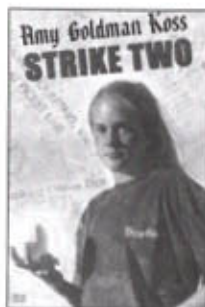
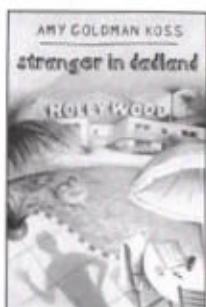
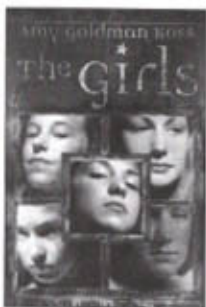
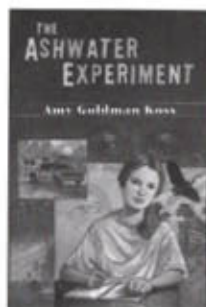
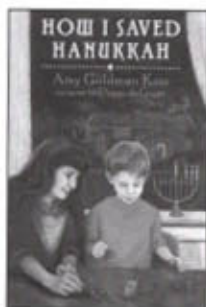




THE BOOKS OF AMY GOLDMAN KOSS

A READER'S COMPANION



Dial Books • Puffin Books
Divisions of Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers

ABOUT THIS READER'S COMPANION



Looking for a great book or author to discuss in your book group? Wondering what you'll write or talk about for those reports at school? Now that you've picked up this reader's companion from Penguin Putnam, we know you'll find the answers to your questions!

A great tool for learning more about books and authors, our reader's companions are designed to help bring writers and readers closer together. Each companion includes a book summary, discussion questions, an interview with the author, further reading suggestions, and Internet sites of interest. If you're looking for a topic or just something to muse over, inside you'll find information that will spark your interest and—we hope—get you hooked on a strong, original voice in literature.

Enjoy!

Reader's Companion © 2001 Penguin Putnam Inc.

How I Saved Hanukkah jacket illustration © 1998 Diane deGroat

The Ashwater Experiment jacket illustration © 1999 Stephen Marchesi

The Girls jacket illustration © 2000 Cliff Nielsen

Stranger in Dadland jacket illustration © 2001 Jesse Reich

Strike Two jacket illustration © 2001 Kazuhiko Sano

All or part of this companion may be reproduced for book group, classroom, or library purposes.

PENGUIN PUTNAM BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

A DIVISION OF PENGUIN PUTNAM INC.

345 HUDSON STREET NEW YORK, NY 10014

A READER'S COMPANION
BY SUSAN BLOOM

DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
SIMMONS COLLEGE
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

CONTENTS



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
BOOKS OF AMY GOLDMAN KOSS

2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

7

AMY GOLDMAN KOSS ON HER BOOKS

9

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

11

FURTHER READING

13

INTERNET SITES OF INTEREST

14

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOKS OF AMY GOLDMAN KOSS



Amy Goldman Koss understands exactly what it means to be a teenager caught between childhood and emerging adulthood—with both often feeling more like foreign countries than home. Carving out this often-excruciating, often-uproariously comic terrain of middle school, Koss hones in on that time when feelings of not knowing exactly who one is are particularly acute. Koss's sense of the contemporary world of teenagers and its particular problems makes her books real, relevant, and revelatory.

Twelve-year-old Hillary in *The Ashwater Experiment* may be Koss's ultimate spokesperson. She expresses a universal truth when she exclaims, "I always felt like I was acting," or when she reveals about herself that she is "alone and unknowable." She vacillates between thinking that she is the only real person in the world and thinking that everything and everyone else is real except her.

Each of Koss's protagonists announces some variant of this universal angst. Sound lugubrious? Not at all. In Koss's novels these feelings of outsiderhood, of wondering where one belongs, are always leavened by humor, often through the voice of her half-knowing protagonist. As her characters grow to understand their shifting place in the world, especially within their family and among their friends, they get to know and trust themselves better. Koss's wonderfully real and flawed human beings will serve as fictional friends and role models for all those readers who wonder—often alone—about the same things.

HOW I SAVED HANUKKAH

Fourth-grader Marla Feinstein finds herself on the outside at school. Nothing can disguise the fact that Marla is the only Jewish kid in her grade, the only one who gets white and blue construction paper when everyone else is given the customary holiday red and green. Things aren't much better at home. For Hanukkah her mother starts the eight-day Jewish celebration with an unwrapped gift of six rolls of Scotch tape. When her best friend, Lucy, gets to stay with Marla during the holidays, Marla determines to learn about the holiday her mother barely celebrates—because “we are Jewish no matter what.” By the eighth day, the girls, led by the resolved Marla, have organized a Hanukkah party. They have also learned to dance the hora and to play the dreidel game. Marla's proud and amazed father, along with Lucy's whole family, has returned from out of town to join in the festivities. Most importantly, Marla has learned the meaning of Hanukkah and no longer feels like a holiday outcast.

THE ASHWATER EXPERIMENT

Hillary has spent her life on the road, traveling with her loving hippie parents who are loath to put down roots anywhere. When they agree to house-sit in Ashwater, California, for nine months, Hillary will face the longest stint in a single place in her life. Despite her travels, she knows the school scene (at twelve, she's already been to seventeen schools) with its popular crowd, its class clown, its smart kid, and its sleepwalkers. Unaware of her own hunger for friendship and a sense of belonging, Hillary thinks she will again distance herself from everyone and become one of the sleepwalkers. She even devises an experiment to buttress herself against loneliness: Nothing and no one is real but Hillary, so how can she be involved, how can she be hurt or excluded? She creates the Watchers to monitor her reactions. But those whom she

has stereotyped turn into real people and suddenly she has friends—the popular Serena, who is more than a pretty mall-goer, the class clown Brian, whom she watches suffer as she tries to tutor him in math, and the smart Cass, who is the quiet and wise and true friend. Cass and Hillary put down real roots in a vegetable garden they build together, and it is a surprising wrench for Hillary when her parents must move once more. How can Hillary pull up literal and symbolic stakes again? It is what Hillary has learned about herself and others in Ashwater that will allow her to move on—to hold on and let go simultaneously.

THE GIRLS

Maya wakes up Saturday morning excited to learn that she is going to Magic Mountain and can bring a friend. Two phone calls later, she has discovered that her friends are having a sleepover and she has been excluded, for reasons that neither she (nor three of her friends) can fathom. The next Monday she must return to school, alone. This piercingly truthful tale of middle school cruelty is told in alternating chapters from the point of view of each of the girls: the unsuspecting victim Maya, the manipulative leader Candace, her loyal “executioner” Darcy, the decent although meek Renée, and the willing follower Brianna. Through their narratives in which they all sound similarly fearful of Candace, we learn how different they really are and how their home lives have shaped them and their personalities. Even Candace emerges as more than just hateful in her terrified speculations about fire. The final chapter of this short tale is reserved for Nicole, the new “friend” of Candace who will unseat the confident Darcy, altering once again the changing allegiances to which cliques appear bound.

STRANGER IN DADLAND

John is hopeful that this year will be different as he boards a plane in Kansas, alone for the first time without the comfort of his older sister, Liz, to visit his divorced father in California. John finds himself compliant once again as his neglectful father goes off to meetings, abandoning John to his latest girlfriend, Cora, or to the neighbor next door. When John finally does explode, it makes little difference to Dad—who only asks that John be more mannerly. The week's possible salvation appears to reside not with his father, but with Cora's vivacious niece Iris who plots Cora's wedding with John's father, and with Beau, the quirky next door neighbor who knows everyone in the building intimately. A chance skating accident incapacitates John's father and, unable to schedule himself away from his son, he actually talks to John for the first time. As father learns about son, son also gains insight into his dad's behavior and past. Boarding the plane alone to return home, John reflects on his own newly gained strength and knowledge. He unexpectedly now looks forward to a trip back to California—to an emerging relationship with his dad, and new friends in the bargain.

STRIKE TWO

All Gwen "ever wanted to do" that summer was play softball—along with her best friend/cousin, Jess. Life is uncomplicated: Gwen has a happy family, good friends, a sport that consumes her. When her union-supporting father first goes on strike at the newspaper where his twin brother is management, it seems a minor blip in Gwen's summer plans. However, the strike lasts longer than anticipated and draws divisions not only within the community but also in Gwen's family—divisions that

even her strong, no-nonsense Gram feels powerless to alter. For Gwen the greatest loss is that she must quit the team because it becomes all management, and she experiences feelings of aloneness and, like her grandmother, powerlessness. But the despair that makes Gwen think her parents want a divorce or that her cousin really hates her is self-defeating and paralyzing. Recognizing her own inaction, Gwen determines to "try once more to risk the right thing." Her plan to bring peace by secretly orchestrating a coed game of softball between union and management kids has a positive effect on everyone.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Intertextuality is the literary term to express the interconnectedness of human language, its patterns, images, and meanings. It often refers to the presence of other texts or story elements in any given text. For example, in *Stranger in Dadland* there are repeated references to *The Wizard of Oz*, ostensibly because Kansas is John's home. How else does the reference to Oz strengthen Koss's novel? What does the book reveal about the heart and cowardice versus courage? Sometimes these references may be less developed, like the many allusions in *Strike Two* to *Gone With the Wind*, a story about the Civil War, a time of deep divisiveness in this country in which brother was set up against brother. Astute readers of *The Ashwater Experiment* will remember that Lois Lowry's Anastasia in *Anastasia Krupnik* had a changing list in her journal of Things I Like and Things I Don't Like. How does knowing this reference enhance the reading of Koss's book? Find other references to literature in Koss's other novels.

2. Each of Koss's books is told from the first person point of view, and we feel the great sense of intimacy and connectedness that comes with such well-told narratives. However, Koss enlivens her stories with fully realized secondary characters: for example, Vicky and Abe in *Strike Two*; Serena and Cass in *The Ashwater Experiment*; Beau and Cora in *Stranger in Dadland*, Lucy and Ned in *How I Saved Hanukkah*. Often these other characters have a lightness and sense of humor less apparent in the teller of the tale. Why might Koss reserve her marvelous sense of the comic for these secondary characters? What device(s) beside humor does Koss use to impart such life to these lesser figures?

3. In *The Girls*, Koss employs her signature first-person point of view, but she alternates the tale among five girls. How would the story change if it were told only from Maya's point of view? Think about what would be gained and lost if the story were told from any single girl's point of view.

4. Each of Koss's novels about inclusion and exclusion is built on a familiar situation, something readers can easily relate to. Yet Koss's strength is to move beyond the obvious and craft a tale both original and unpredictable. In what way(s), for example, are *The Ashwater Experiment* and *The Girls* the same story? How does Koss rise above the usual to invest you in her story?

5. *Strike Two* is Koss's first novel to openly complicate a personal story with a political one. The title *Strike Two* obviously refers to both the ball field and the newspaper. Why strike two? Why not strike one or strike out?

6. In what ways does *The Ashwater Experiment* less explicitly raise political issues? More subtly, all of Koss's books address class, race, and gender concerns. Even in *Strike Two*, in which workers are pointedly pitted against management, Koss more quietly introduces ethnicity in the names of her characters and gender in the professions of her characters. Find examples in all of her books of gentle yet decided comments about important contemporary issues.

7. Three of Koss's characters use repetitive adolescent language: John punctuates thoughts with "sheesh"; Brian sees everything as "cool"; Gwen often uses the word "yick." What other words or language identifies Koss's young people as contemporary? Do you think these books are time specific?

AMY GOLDMAN KOSS
ON HER BOOKS



In many of your books, the protagonists are preteen girls dealing with very real life issues like friends and self-esteem. Where do you find your inspiration for these characters?

Of all the ages and stages of life, I find those tricky half-girl/half-woman years the most compelling, so that's the age my characters are. But I can't really explain where the individual characters come from. They create themselves as I write them. I know that sounds loony, but it's true.

Are your characters a bit autobiographical?

The actual events, specific situations, and relationships in my books are not autobiographical, but all the feelings are mine, of course. And since my characters spring out of my heart and mind, I guess they all—male, female, child, teen, and adult—are me. Who else could they be?

*How difficult was it to write **Stranger in Dadland**? It is your only book with a young boy as the protagonist.*

Now THAT book was a challenge! With my dad, my brother, and my friend Peter as consultants, I had to come face-to-face with my own sexism. A very sobering experience for a feminist like me! But once I'd wrestled with those demons and got to know my characters (especially John and Beau), they wrote themselves very nicely for me and we all became terrific friends.

When did you begin writing?

November 3, 1972. That's a lie. Actually, I have no idea when I began writing. I can't remember a time when I didn't write. But I suppose it's unlikely that I was writing in the crib. Perhaps I became a writer when I went from fantasizing and daydreaming to writing those daydreams down. Maybe it truly began when I first showed what I'd written to someone else. That would put it at about seventh grade for me.

Who/what was your inspiration to begin writing?

Although I always wrote, it never occurred to me that I could write for a living. Everyone I knew growing up did their art on the side. My mom was a teacher by day for pay, but was in plays and choruses for fun in her time off. My dad hated his job as a jukebox man, but painted and played violin and did his gorgeous woodworking on the weekends. I didn't think writers were just regular people taking risks. I thought they were something special until my twenties, when I became one of them!

Do you have a favorite character from your books?

I love all my babies—even the mean ones.

Do you have any advice for young authors?

My advice is to pay attention to the world around you. Turn off the TV and listen instead to what people say and don't say. Watch what they do and how they do it—what things look, taste, feel, smell, and sound like. Concentrate on the voices in your head, because that's where it is all brewing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I remember nothing about being born in Detroit, Michigan, but here's what I remember about being a kid: I was afraid of almost everything, especially spiders, the dark, and the inevitability of death. Now I'm okay with the first two. My parents made me finish everything on my plate no matter what. Now I eat everything but smoked oysters. My older brother was a royal pain and my grandmother liked him more than she liked me. Now he's not so bad, though. I liked funny and sad books but NOT scary books, and that hasn't changed.

In school, I was lousy at math and spelling and history and geography, but I was excellent at the things that matter, such as doodling. I wasn't particularly popular, but I had a best friend named Birdy whom I could boss around, and a second best friend named Carolyn whom I could boss around when Birdy and I were fighting. So I was covered.

I wore glasses and was very, very skinny, and my ears poked out through my limp brown hair. Now I am a raving beauty and could be a rich supermodel if I wanted to, but I don't.

After being a kid, I became a teenager, and all that is pretty embarrassing to remember and nobody's business anyway. I went to some schools and moved around from Michigan to Massachusetts to Florida. I ate way too many smoked oysters and had a whole slew of stupid jobs that paid badly. It went on like that until I became a FICTIONWRITER.

And NOW: I am an adult and it is marvelous to be me. I have two perfectly well-adjusted children who NEVER draw each other's blood or clobber each other with blunt instruments or scream obscenities for all the neighborhood to hear or get in trouble with the law. I have a handsome, successful husband who is slavishly devoted to me and laughs at all my jokes.

And I've the cutest pets that never puke on the couch. I have plenty of money and oodles of attractive, witty friends who adore me. And I live in California. The photographer from The Magazine of Amazingly Elegant Living is on his way to my house right now. And like they say, "If you've got your health, you've got everything."

FURTHER READING



Bat 6

by Virginia Euwer Wolff
Scholastic Books

A Face First

by Priscilla Cummings
Dutton Children's Books
0-525-46522-7, \$15.99 (\$22.99 CAN)

Hope Was Here

by Joan Bauer
G. P. Putnam's Sons
0-399-23142-0, \$16.99 (\$23.99 CAN)

Joey Pigza Loses Control

by Jack Gantos
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Notes from a Liar and Her Dog

by Gennifer Choldenko
G. P. Putnam's Sons
0-399-23591-4, \$18.99 (\$27.99 CAN)

INTERNET SITES OF INTEREST



News and Newspapers Online

From the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, this site gives you a listing of newspapers around the world, from state to national newspapers.

A good resource after reading *Strike Two*.

<http://library.uncg.edu/news/>

Alloy

Dedicated to teen culture and lifestyle.

www.alloy.com

Chanukah Celebration!

Sponsored by Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, this page describes all aspects of Hanukkah, also spelled Chanukah.

<http://www.ou.org/chagim/chanukah>

NOTES



NOTES



NOTES



To access Penguin Putnam Reader's Companions online, visit us
on the Web at: www.penguinputnam.com



Books by Amy Goldman Koss

Strike Two

New Fall 2001!

0-8037-2607-4, \$16.99 (\$24.99 CAN)

Stranger in Dadland

0-8037-2563-9, \$16.99 (\$24.99 CAN)

The Girls

HC: 0-8037-2494-2, \$16.99 (\$24.99 CAN)

Coming in Spring 2002!

PB: 0-14-230033-0, \$4.99 (\$7.50 CAN)

The Ashwater Experiment

HC: 0-8037-2391-1, \$16.99 (\$24.99 CAN)

PB: 0-14-131092-8, \$5.99 (\$8.99 CAN)

How I Saved Hanukkah

HC: 0-8037-2241-9, \$15.99 (\$22.99 CAN)

PB: 0-14-130982-2, \$4.99 (\$6.99 CAN)

