

Dear teacher,

Gittel's Journey is more than a picture book. It is a story and work of art to be shared with readers of all ages. It is a family story to be read with small children; a source of education and stepping-stone for student research; and an inspiration to reflect and think critically for older readers.

Not only can this book serve as a centerpiece for curriculum on the Ellis Island experience, but also as a touchstone for conversation about diversity, human rights, and social justice. Younger readers may focus on Gittel's predicament as a child on her own, while more advanced readers may use the text as a starting place to learn about issues of immigration today.

Gittel's Journey provides teachers the chance to address current topics like immigration in a past setting, allowing readers to draw humane conclusions through empathy with a child's story.

Students may have heard the phrase "We are all immigrants." This is not exactly true. When introducing this book in a classroom setting, remind students that indigenous peoples have always lived on the land known today as the United States of America. Indigenous people are not immigrants, and people brought here while enslaved did not travel here of their own free will.

Teachers might be anxious about reading *Gittel's Journey* in a classroom because both immigration and disease are political topics. Depending upon the situation, keep conversations grounded in Gittel's own experience and guide students back to the text if the discussion strays too far. That said, this moment of connection between Gittel's story and issues today can be where the most fruitful learning happens.

Lastly, *Gittel's* is a special story. While there are millions of Ellis Island immigration stories, not all immigrants share her path. *Gittel's* story reminds us that immigrants are individuals who have families, hopes, and dreams, and are worthy of dignity.

VOCABULARY

Discuss the difference between immigrate and emigrate with your students.

Talk about some of the different kinds of immigrants: refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented workers. Asylum seekers and refugees are immigrants who are fleeing their homes for specific reasons, such as violence, and seeking safety in another country. The terms asylum seeker and refugee tend to be used interchangeably. Both are immigrants who are fleeing their homes due to persecution; the distinction (from an American perspective) lies in where the person is when applying for official status in the United States. An asylum seeker is applying from within the United States, and a refugee is applying from elsewhere. Discourage the use of illegal aliens in favor of undocumented workers.

For further resources on language and terminology, consult the following:

- Amnesty International
www.amnesty.org.au/refugee-and-an-asylum-seeker-difference
- Teaching Tolerance, the educational wing of the Southern Poverty Law Center
www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/the-language-of-the-immigration-debate

SOCIAL STUDIES

Indigenous Land Acknowledgment

Gittel's Journey features characters who travel to the United States to begin new lives. It is important that we remember that there are people who were living in the United States before the boats came. There is a practice, one becoming fairly standard in various parts of the world including Canada, of beginning any talk or event by acknowledging the indigenous inhabitants of that land. This acknowledgment is a gesture of respect and recognition that indigenous peoples' histories and cultures have been deliberately erased by colonizers. Research your own location and the peoples who lived there pre-colonization. As we recover *Gittel's* experience, and those of other immigrants to the United States, we can be mindful that indigenous experiences are also in need of recovery and honor.

Read more about Indigenous Land Acknowledgment on the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture's website: usdac.us/nativeland. You can also consult a map of Indigenous territories in North America here: native-land.ca/territory-acknowledgement.

As a bonus for older students, read or listen to this interview from CBC's *Unreserved*, "I regret it": Hayden King on writing Ryerson University's

territorial acknowledgement": www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/redrawing-the-lines-1.4973363/i-regret-it-hayden-king-on-writing-ryerson-university-s-territorial-acknowledgement-1.4973371. Discuss Hayden's comments as a class.

Ellis Island

Gittel arrives in the United States at Ellis Island, a location that plays a large role in immigration to the northeast United States. Research the history of Ellis Island. *Gittel's* is an Ellis Island story, but Ellis Island was not the only port of entry. Where else did people enter the US? Use the following links as additional reference:

- The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation
www.libertyellisfoundation.org
- National Park Service's dedicated Ellis Island page
www.nps.gov/elis/index.htm
- Scholastic's interactive tour of Ellis Island
teacher.scholastic.com/activities/immigration/tour
- PBS's American Experience
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldman-immigration-and-deportation-ellis-island>

Social Studies *continued*

Ellis Island

When Gittel arrives at Ellis Island, she discovers that the piece of paper her mother gave her is blank. Have younger readers practice their predicting skills at this moment in the story: What will Gittel do? How will she find her family? How will the story end?

Gittel is lucky that she meets the kind interpreter at Ellis Island, and he helps her find her mama’s cousin. Today there are organizations that help immigrants. Who are they? What kind of resources do they offer? Research groups like the International Committee of the Red Cross (icrc.org) or the United Nations Refugee Agency (unrefugees.org). Are there organizations in your local area that do this work?

Why do people move? Why do people move from one place to another in the United States? Ask students if they have moved and ask them to contribute possible reasons why (opportunities, jobs, socioeconomic and cultural factors). Which parts of moving were difficult for them? Which parts were exciting? Why do people move from other countries to the United States? Note that these reasons are often similar to the reasons that people move within the United States.

Why did Gittel move? With younger readers, you may want to stay with Gittel’s mama’s explanation that “Home is not safe for us. You are going to America to have a better life.” With older readers, you can research and talk about the pogroms of Eastern Europe and look specifically at the history of Jewish people in Europe. Make sure to note that Gittel is emigrating decades before the Nazis come to power and that the specific anti-Semitism that Gittel and her mother are fleeing (while a significant precursor to Nazi roundups) is not part of the Holocaust. Creating a timeline may be helpful. This might also be a good time to introduce the term asylum seeker if you have not already. Older students will be able to situate Gittel’s move within a longer timeline and larger context of global anti-Semitism.

What do we give up or leave behind when we move? Encourage students who have moved to share their experiences. What does Gittel leave behind? Ask students to research and talk about life in an Eastern European shtetl, or village, at the turn of the century. What would make the trip worth the sacrifice for Gittel? For students?

Gittel and her mama are stopped at the port of their home country, and Gittel is stopped at Ellis Island. For younger readers, pause here and talk about what borders are and what they mean. Use photographs of national borders (such as those between the US and Canada, and the US and Mexico) aid the conversation. What do the borders look like in Gittel’s story (both in her home country and in the United States)? What do borders of a state or town look like? What are the borders of a classroom? What are some good reasons to have borders? What do borders make difficult? Why are borders contested spaces? Why might someone be nervous here? With older readers, explore what happens at borders between countries, potential reasons for not being allowed entry, and issues of separation. What would Gittel’s journey look like today if she were entering via the US-Mexican border? Examine immigration around the world and what it looks like in various regions, for example the boats of refugees traveling to Europe by sea.

Why can’t Gittel’s mama board the boat with her? Why is Gittel initially happy about this? Why is her mama upset? Why was it important to be healthy when traveling? With younger students, discuss the practice of getting certain vaccinations before traveling to various countries. With older students, research how disease has historically affected and been deployed against various populations.

Have students research the history of their town. Which indigenous peoples lived in this area? Who else came to this region? When, why, and how? Have older students research the use of immigration quotas in the United States, including the often dark and discriminatory side of this legislation. Look at which ethnic groups were

Social Studies *continued*

Ellis Island

welcomed, and which were discouraged, and how this changed over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Examine policies on the west coast regarding Asian immigrants (e.g. the Chinese Exclusion Act), as well as what happened with the German ocean liner *St. Louis* in 1939. This certainly complicates the narrative of immigration and the United States but also help students understand present-day issues a bit more and fill the gaps in between Gittel’s story and today.

Introduce students to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, in the wake of World War II: www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights. The document articulates the rights inherent to each human being in the entire world. Take a careful look at Articles 13 and 14, which

detail the right to movement and the right to seek asylum. Make a Declaration of Rights for your classroom. What rights should students and teachers have? What rules of behavior would be fair?

Look at the image of the Statue of Liberty on the page facing the title page, as well as on the page where Gittel sees her for the first time. Where else do we see images of the Statue of Liberty? What does she symbolize? Can you think of other symbols that are important in American history and culture?

Lastly, to explore context for what Gittel’s new life in New York City might be like (including a virtual tour), see the Tenement Museum: www.tenement.org.

CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

Gittel and her mama are Jewish. They celebrate Jewish holidays and follow Jewish customs. Research Jewish holidays (notably Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Passover, and Hanukkah). Use another of Lesléa Newman’s picture books, *Here Is the World: A Year of Jewish Holidays*, to introduce these to young readers.

Gittel and her mama follow rituals for eating special meals. What do they do on the Shabbos?

What traditions are special to your family? Does your family have a special meal? Research the history of one of your own traditions. These might be part of holidays, but they might not be. (If you would like to keep the focus secular, your class could research the history of the traditions having to do with national holidays or birthdays.) Have younger readers draw a picture of a special meal and tell a story about it. Ask older readers to interview family members about traditions particular to your family, and where they may have originated. Generate inspiration from NPR’s StoryCorps,

particularly their Great Thanksgiving Listen project: storycorps.org/participate/the-great-thanksgiving-listen. Reference Newman’s own relationship with her family’s story, as written about in her Author’s Note. Check out her interview with her Aunt Phyllis on her website: lesleakids.com/books-for-kids-teens/picture-books/gittels-journey-an-ellis-island-story.



GEOGRAPHY

The real Gittel was from Łomża (Lomzhe in Yiddish) which today is in Poland. Because of wars and border disputes, this area has been claimed as part of a number of countries, including what was then known as Prussia. Poland became a country again at the end of World War I, and then had its borders reestablished at the end of World War II. Look at maps of Poland today, and then of Poland during its three historic partitions. Find Łomża on these maps. What are some observations you can make about the country we today know as Poland? What might it be like to live in a town that becomes part of multiple countries?

Consult the following online resources on Jewish life in Łomża:

- JewishGen's KehliaLinks
kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/lomza/original/index.htm
- The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe
yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/%C5%81lomza

How do you or the adults in your life make plans to travel? What kinds of resources do we use? Plan a trip to Łomża. What would you pack? How do Gittel and her mother plan their trip? How is their experience different from yours?

Use Google Earth or another mapping program to measure the distance of Gittel's journey. How long did it take her? How long would it take today? What would life be like on a steamship? Would you be able to live on a steamship for two weeks? What do conditions look like for Gittel? Look at photos from the Ellis Island resources.

Look at the numbers of immigrants who came to Ellis Island. When were quotas introduced, and for which countries?

Look at a map of ethnic neighborhoods in New York City at the turn of the century. What are some pros to living together by nation/culture of origin? What are some cons of living together? Use the Tenement Museum's website.



SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Consider the image of the camera in the book. How does it differ from cameras today? How did cameras work in the early 1900s? Did it use film? How was it developed? How much time does it take between taking a picture and seeing the image? What could you do with the camera pictured in *Gittel's Journey*? What can it not do?

Gittel is found by her mother's cousin because he saw her photograph in a newspaper. Research newspapers and their roles in daily life in New York City at the turn of the century. Look into literacy rates at this time. Gittel's photo also appeared in a Jewish newspaper. Who would be reading this? Why? What did language and culture specific newspapers allow people to do? Make a newspaper for your class.

In *Gittel's Journey*, we see letters, newspapers, and photos used to keep in touch and communicate. What are some ways that you communicate?

How does Gittel travel to the United States? How would you travel to where she lives? (Hint: flying directly into Łomża might not be an option.)

LANGUAGE ARTS

Gittel writes a letter to her friend Raisa. Have students write Gittel's letter to Raisa, using the book as a basis for the details included.

Research what your hometown was like around the turn of the century. Imagine that you have just moved there and write a letter to a friend or family member back home. What would your letter say? How would you describe your new home? To practice describing everyday objects with fresh eyes, read Craig Raine's poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home": www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/a-martian-sends-a-postcard-home.

Read the entire Emma Lazarus poem "The New Colossus": www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus. Why might this be an appropriate poem to be placed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty? What does it say to newcomers? What does it mean for people who already live in the United States? Ask students to write a poem or letter to welcome people to their classroom. Make sure the poem or letter says what is special about the classroom and the people in it.

Discussion Questions

1. Gittel has to be incredibly brave when she must travel to a different country all alone. Is there a time you needed to be especially brave? How did you feel? Can you think of a time when you were afraid of something? What did you do to help yourself through this situation? What made you feel better?
2. Gittel must take on adult responsibilities quickly as a young person. What are potential obstacles for her? If you were left alone, as Gittel was, what would you do? What would you do in order to stay safe?
3. The interpreter could have been abrupt like the officer at the port in Gittel's home country. Why is it so important to Gittel that the interpreter is kind? What does he help her do? Why should we be kind?
4. We see the shabbat candles and candlesticks three times in the story. What role do they play for Gittel? For readers? What role does the piece of paper play in the story?
5. How does Gittel stay connected to her mama while they are separated?
6. If you could bring only one object with you on a move to a new place, what would it be and why? What would this object say about you? Why would it be important to future generations of your family? Are there any objects in your home that have a family story? Have younger students make small dolls like Gittel's. Students could write their family object stories, and teachers could compile a book of all of them to share and talk about how many families have traditions and stories, and that differences are special, too.
7. Gittel speaks Yiddish and will likely learn how to speak English once she is in the United States. What languages do you speak? What is useful about speaking multiple languages?
8. Imagine that you had to move to a new country, one where you did not speak the language. What questions or concerns would you have? What would you have to do to feel at home? What do Gittel and her mama need?
9. If you could move anywhere, where would you go and why?



Photo by Mary Vazquez

ART

Newman's text and Bates's images work together to produce *Gittel's Journey*. To appreciate how these two elements work together, examine the text alone without the illustrators. How would you illustrate Newman's story? Conversely, only look at the book's illustrations. Could you write a different story based on the images? Now, reread the story together. How do the images enhance the words and vice versa? Make connections between aesthetics and narrative. Use Molly Bang's *Picture This: How Pictures Work* in talking about how elements of design work and offer language to use in discussing pictures.

Asks students to describe Bates's illustrations. Note Bates's color palate and her use of the red kerchief. How does this help readers? Look at the borders around each illustrated page. What kind of feel does it give the image?

Compare Bates's images with the photographs in the Author's Note. What does a photograph convey? What does Bates' illustration convey?



Sadie Gringrass, Aunt Phyllis's mother and the "real" Gittel, at age nineteen in 1917. Photo courtesy of Phyllis Rubin.

Note the end papers, title pages, and the borders/frames around each page. These appear to have been made by woodblocking. What is the visual effect of woodblocking? How would you describe it? How is this done? You might collaborate with an art instructor to offer a basic woodblocking lesson. This could also help students appreciate the intricacies of Bates's woodblock designs.

There is a border surrounding each image as well as each block of text. These borders can be likened to frames, gates, windows, and doors. Ask students what the function of each item is. How might we connect those functions to the text and the illustrations? Provide students with an image on paper and have them create their own borders for it, as well as share their thinking behind their artistic choices.

The borders resemble a specifically Jewish image of a set of gates found on ketubah documents. Ketubot are traditional Jewish wedding contracts signed by the people getting married. Why might the illustrator have chosen to make the pages look like they are framed by icons of Jewish celebration, commitment, and new beginning?

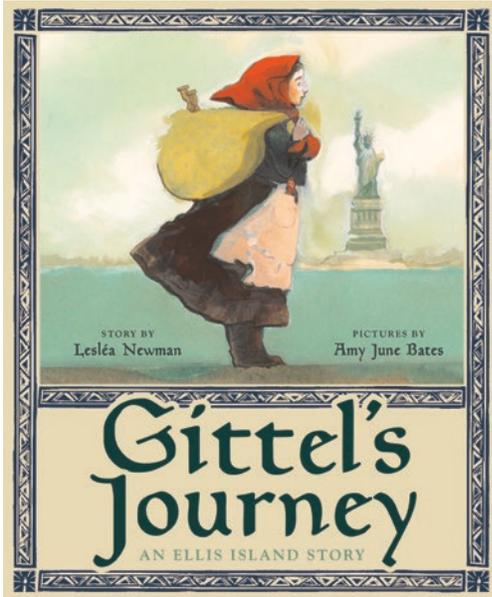
Most of the images are limited to one page. There are, however, a few spreads in which the image takes up two facing pages. Which images are these? How are they significant to the story? Why do you think these particular images are chosen to be on two pages?

Look at the two-page spread that depicts Gittel and her mother's journey to the port. How can we tell that it takes Gittel and her mother a long time to get there? What else does this image convey about their trip, and how? How is movement conveyed?

Look at the two-page spread of Gittel and the boat. How does Bates use scale? How does this make readers feel? How does she use color?

GITTEL'S JOURNEY

By Lesléa Newman • Illustrated by Amy June Bates



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PRAISE

- ★ *“Clever and true . . . This serves as a reminder that Lady Liberty’s words once mirrored U.S. immigration policy.”*
— *Booklist*
- ★ *“Mixed-media images by Bates, washed in yellows and browns and framed by woodblock motifs, give readers a vivid sense of the historical context while infusing the story with a timeless emotional immediacy. Newman skillfully modulates her narration, capturing her protagonist’s feelings of excitement, loneliness, and fear.”*
— *Publishers Weekly*
- ★ *“Artfully capture[s] an era and people.”*
— *School Library Journal*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lesléa Newman is the author of seventy books for adults and children. She has received many literary awards, including the Association of Jewish Libraries Sydney Taylor Award, the Massachusetts Book Award, and a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She lives in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Visit her online at lesleanewman.com.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Amy June Bates is the illustrator of *Bear in the Air*, *Minette’s Feast*, and *The Dog Who Belonged to No One*. She lives in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Follow her at amyjates.com.