The Blood Lie Study Guide

The Blood Lie tells the story of a hate crime that dramatically tested the friendships and beliefs of youths in a small New York town—and changed their lives forever. This historical novel is based on the first—and, until recently, the only—blood libel ever reported in the entire Western Hemisphere.

In The Blood Lie, Daisy, a four-year-old Christian girl, disappears from the village of Massena just before Yom Kippur in 1928. Rumor spreads that the Jews—specifically, 16-year-old Jack Pool—kidnapped and ritually murdered Daisy for her blood. The fallout challenges relationships, convictions and honor on both sides of the crisis, demonstrating the different ways people respond to fear, prejudice and oppression.

While The Blood Lie is a story about Jews and anti-Semites, it is also a larger story about hate and intolerance. The consequences of prejudice are universal and bring to mind many events from our past, as well as from today’s headlines. These include: McCarthyism, the KKK, Salem Witch Trials, Japanese-American internment camps, racial and/or ethnic profiling, the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing, immigration conflicts, and the demonization of Muslims in our post-9/11 world.

Background

Blood libel
The term blood libel refers to the accusation that Jews murder Gentiles and use their blood in religious rituals. The first blood accusation on record happened in the first century AD, when certain Greeks claimed that the Jews annually fattened a Greek in the Temple of Jerusalem, killing the victim, offering his body as a sacrifice, and eating his organs.

The first case in which Jews were accused of ritually murdering a Christian child happened in Norwich, England in 1144. Following that incident, blood libels started cropping up throughout England and elsewhere in Europe, including Germany and France.

In the thirteenth century, a blood libel strongly contributed to the expulsion of all Jews from England. A Christian boy named Hugh from the village of Lincoln disappeared, and his body turned up in a Jew’s water well, where the real murderers had secretly disposed of him. The Jew underwent torture until he confessed to kidnapping Hugh, fattening him, beating him, crucifying him and drinking his blood. By the time it was all over, twenty Jews were publicly hanged and another twenty imprisoned in the Tower of London. In 1290, all the Jews in the country were banished for 400 years.

Blood accusations flourished in the Middle Ages and beyond, with thousands of Jews being tortured and murdered in so-called revenge. The blood libel was one of Hitler’s propaganda tools, as well. For example, the Nazi newspaper Der Stürmer (literally, “The Stormer”) ran a special issue devoted to promoting the blood libel. The headline read “Jewish Murder Plan against Gentile Humanity Revealed” and featured a drawing of four rabbis sucking the blood of a Christian child through straws.

Unfortunately, blood accusations are still happening. In 2002, for example, a student demonstration at San Francisco State University featured posters of a soup can whose label showed dripping blood, a dead baby with its stomach sliced open, and the words “Made in Israel, Palestinian children meat, slaughtered according to Jewish rites under American license.” Believe it or not, this blood lie was made on the campus of a public American university by students using public funds.

Also in 2002, the Saudi government-run newspaper Al-Riyadh ran an article describing how Jews go about getting the blood of teenagers to use in their Purim holiday pastries: “For this, a needle-studded barrel is used. [These needles] pierce the victim’s body from the moment he is placed in the barrel…the victim’s blood drips from him very slowly. Thus,
the victim suffers dreadful torment—torment that affords the Jewish vampires great delight as they carefully monitor every detail of the blood-shedding with pleasure and love…”

Shortly before Passover 2008, posters appeared all over Russia’s third largest city, Novosibirsk, warning residents to keep a close eye on their children, lest they fall victim to Jews seeking blood to mix in their matzos. The posters read: “These vermin are still performing rituals, stealing small children and draining their blood to make their sacred bread.” The posters also attributed a recent spate of child disappearances and murders to Jewish ritual sacrifices.

In a variation of the classic blood libel, the prominent Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet published a story in 2009 claiming that the Israeli army kidnaps and kills Palestinians in order to reap their organs. Similarly, in 2010, a Canadian Muslim newspaper accused Jews of kidnapping “some 25,000 Ukrainian children…over the past two years in order to harvest their organs.”

Clearly, the blood libel is alive and well in the 21st century. In the United States, we know where it started: Massena, NY. The question that remains is: where will it end, if ever?

**The Blood Lie’s inspiration: the blood libel in Massena, NY**

Here’s what actually happened in Massena, to the best of anyone’s ability to piece the story together. On the day before Yom Kippur in September 1928, four-year-old Barbara Griffiths went into the woods near her Massena home. She didn’t come out by nightfall, despite the efforts of a search crew and the involvement of the state police. As the hours stretched on with no clue to the girl’s fate, an ugly rumor started and quickly spread. There was a Jewish holiday coming up, wasn’t there? And wasn’t there something about the Jews needing Christian blood in their rituals? Could there be a connection between the blood practice and little Barbara’s disappearance?

The first Jew that the police questioned was probably 21-year-old William Shulkin. Later, the town’s rabbi, Berel Brennglass, was called for questioning; he used the forum to sharply denounce anyone who would accuse the Jews of ritual murder.

The next afternoon, little Barbara, who had simply gotten lost in the woods, wandered out of the forest and was noticed by someone along the road, less than a half mile from her home. Hungry but unharmed, she was happily reunited with her family.

But what would have happened if she hadn’t been found, or if she’d been found dead or injured?

Nothing about the incident ever appeared in the Massena Observer—not a news story, not an editorial word of apology. There seemed to be a consensus to hush the whole matter up.

A little background on Massena: the village is located on the St. Lawrence River in Northern New York State, just a few miles from the Ontario border. A longtime farming community, the opening of an aluminum smelting plant there in the early 1900s brought industry to the area. Jews started arriving from Russia and Eastern Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s, seeking to escape the pogroms, official governmental persecution, and poverty of their homelands. By 1920, there were about 20 Jewish families, a rabbi, and a small synagogue.

**Addressing Hate Crimes in America**

Hate crimes—crimes targeted against victims based on their race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity/national origin, or physical/mental disability—are a sad reality in America. The FBI first began investigating hate crimes around the time of World War I, focusing on Ku Klux Klan activity such as lynchings and cross-burnings. Starting with the 1964 Federal Civil Rights Law, the U.S. legislature has sought to protect people against hate crimes. Most recently, President Obama signed the Matthew Shepard Act (October 2009), which expands existing hate crime law to include crimes motivated by a victim’s actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability. The measure was conceived as a response to two 1998 murders: that of 21-year-old Matthew Shepard, who was tortured and murdered in Wyoming because he was perceived as gay; and that of James Byrd, Jr., a black man in Texas who was tied to a truck by two white supremacists, dragged from it, and decapitated.

The Massena blood libel, then, is part of a long and sobering history of hate crime in our country, a history that doesn’t appear to be ending anytime soon. Plainly, it takes more than laws and police officers to create tolerance. What else does it take? That is a fertile topic for discussion.

**Discussion questions/topics**

1. Even before the Massena blood libel, Jack Pool knew about anti-Semitism, and he’d experienced some of it firsthand. Why, then, do you think he is surprised about the blood accusation?

2. What does the Bentley School of Music symbolize to Jack?
3. Does Jack's music become more or less vital to him during the blood libel? Why?

4. Why do you think the Pool family observes some Jewish customs but not others? For example, they keep strictly kosher and don't play sports on the Sabbath. Yet, Mr. Pool and Jack work on Saturdays.

5. Both Emaline and Jack blame themselves, at least in part, for Daisy's disappearance. Do you think anyone is to blame? Who?

6. Why are the Massena Jews so frightened when they first hear about the blood accusation—as opposed to dismissing it as an ignorant reaching for straws?

7. Gus Poulos has more than one motive for accusing the Jews of a terrible crime. What are they? Which do you think is the strongest?

8. With no cell phones, no private phone lines, no email, no Facebook or Twitter, how did people communicate in 1928 Massena? How do you think the low-tech quality of communications affected the events in the story? How do you think such a rumor would play out in today's world?

9. Emaline kicks George Lingstrom out of her house when he tells her about the blood accusation. Putting yourself in her shoes, do you think she'd have done this if it had been a different Jew besides Jack who'd been targeted?

10. Why is Trooper Brown so easily convinced that the blood accusation is credible? Think of his upbringing, his status in the town, and the gravity of the child-disappearance case.

11. What do you think would have happened if the trooper had discovered Jack at the temple the night of the rabbi's interrogation? What if the gang of raiders had found him there?

12. Rabbi Abrams wants the Jewish congregation to help search for Daisy. Jack's father thinks they should all stay at home and protect themselves. What do you think the best course of action would be?

13. The morning after Daisy's disappearance, Stretch Spooner tells everyone at the diner about having just seen the rabbi “dancing all over” his yard with a chicken and then decapitating it. Since Stretch lives next to the rabbi, this is probably not the first time he has witnessed the shlug kapporus ritual. Why is Stretch remarking on it for the first time now?

14. Why does the rabbi want the Jews to forgive the perpetrators of the blood libel? Do you think this is the right thing to do? Why or why not?

**Themes**

**Prejudice and oppression**
Hatred of an entire group of people may be caused by such factors as fear, ignorance, ethnocentrism (the tendency to view one's own group as superior and other groups as inferior), and learned bigotry/stereotyping. Prejudicial attitudes may or may not translate into discriminatory behavior. In The Blood Lie, Gus Poulos is a long-time bigot against Jewish people but doesn't act on those feelings until he has a financial motive.

**Faith in the face of adversity**
Jack's faith is tested during the blood libel. He wonders why he has bothered being an observant Jew his whole life, if God seemingly cares so little about him. And yet, in his time of crisis, it is God Jack talks to, albeit angrily. We are left to wonder how the blood libel will affect Jack's faith and observance in the long run.

**Forgiveness**
Rabbi Abrams asks his congregation to forgive those responsible for the blood libel. Jack, for one, cannot forgive them, and takes offense at being asked to do so. The universal dilemma of if and when to turn the other cheek is painfully illustrated.

**Assimilation vs separateness**
Jack's family struggles over how to balance (a) their need/desire to assimilate into the broader Massena community, and (b) their commitment to maintaining Jewish customs and identity. Jack's parents disagree about whether working on the Sabbath is acceptable, but they agree about other practices, such as keeping kosher. The blood accusation prompts Jack to resent the effort required to keep up his Jewish identity – since he sees that identity as the source of his current crisis.

**Coming of age**
Jack and Emaline are young adults dealing with formative issues: first love, forbidden love, faith, prejudice/oppression, loss, and trauma. How they perceive these issues is based partly on their stage of life. How they fare in dealing with these issues will help shape the kinds of adults they grow into.

**Literary Elements & Devices**

**Characterization**—Which character do you most closely
identify with? Why?

**Point of View**—Which parts of the story are told from Jack's point of view, and which are told from Emaline's? What does this tell you about each character's level of information about what is going on during the crisis?

**Setting**—The Blood Lie takes place in a small American town in the 1920s. How do you think the blood accusation would play out if it happened today where you live? Consider your locality's norms, history, economic wellbeing, access to law enforcement, technology, etc.

**Turning Points**—A turning point is a place where the emotions or action of the story change in an important and often surprising way. (1) Early in the story, we learn that Emaline and George Lingstrom have a flirtatious relationship. Later, things change. What is the turning point in their relationship? (2) Do you think the closing kiss between Jack and Emaline is a turning point in their relationship, or rather something they will try to forget?

**Symbolism**—Symbols are objects that represent larger events, relationships, or ideas. What does music school symbolize to Jack? What does Jack's circumcision symbolize to the other boys on his baseball team?

**Activities**

**English-literature/composition/creative writing**

1. The story ends before we learn whether Jack gets accepted to the Bentley School of Music, whether he and Emaline maintain a romantic relationship, whether any apologies are made to the Jews, or whether the two mothers remain friends. Pick one or more of these unanswered subjects and write an expository scene.

2. Most of the scenes in the book are told from either Jack or Emaline's point of view (even though the book is all in the third-person). Choose one scene and rewrite it from another character's point of view. For example, the trooper's POV when he questions Jack or the rabbi; Mrs. Pool's POV when the rock is thrown through her living room window; cousin Lydie's POV when the girls return to the Durham's house that first evening and find the house full of worried visitors.

**Social studies/U.S. history**

1. Hate crimes are targeted against a person or group based on their race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity/national origin, or physical/mental disability. Assign students (or student groups) to a target category and ask them to research hate crimes against that group – with emphasis on history, statistics, legal/judicial actions, prominent cases, and any progress in lowering the incidence of such crimes.

In class, compare and contrast the findings.

2. Have students research blood libels in both an historical and contemporary context. How did it arise and spread? How is it still being used?

3. Ask students to paint a verbal picture of the U.S. in 1928: Who was running for President? What was the country's immigration policy? What, if anything, was going on with civil rights? How was Prohibition working out?

4. Spin City: Ask half of the students to imagine that they are reporters for the Massena Observer newspaper in September 1928. Their editor has asked them to write a news article about the weekend's events in a way that won't offend anyone, or that will offend as few people as possible. Ask the other half of the class to imagine that they are a local Jew, writing a letter to the editor explaining how the weekend's events have affected him/her.

5. In 1928, many of the residents of Massena were immigrants. Study immigration waves in U.S. history and the rise of xenophobia – the fear and/or hate of people from other countries. Discuss the irony of immigrants hating immigrants.

**Resources for Further Information**

**Websites**


**Books**

Us and Them: A History of Intolerance in America by Jim Carnes

Hate Crimes by Laurie Willis

Freaks and Revelations by Davida Wills Hurwin (novel inspired by a true anti-gay hate crime)

**DVDs**

Crash: fictional exploration of the interlocking lives of a dozen Los Angeles residents – black, white, Latino, Asian, and Persian

Paper Clips: documentary about a consciousness-raising project to teach diversity to a predominantly white,
Protestant student body. Holocaust-related.

Real Life Teens (documentary shorts):
   Racism On Campus
   Teens & Disabilities
   Bullies & Harassment