

Rena's Promise - STUDY GUIDE:

Topics for Group or Class Discussions

1. In the beginning of memoir, the co-author puts herself into the story. Her voice, and narrative flips back and forth between present time and the past then eventually disappears as Rena's voice takes over. Why do you think the author uses this technique? Is it effective for you as a reader, or not?
2. The narrative voice, shifts from present to past tense, in the beginning. If that was disconcerting for you, why was it? What might the author have been trying to do by creating that sense of time shifting beneath you? As Heather's voice fades, we are left only with Rena's voice in the present tense. How does writing about Auschwitz in present tense change your perspective on the events you are reading about?
3. Occasionally, the text uses footnotes which are not in the first person narrative. Why does the author do that? Does that information affect your impression of the events and how they are framed by Rena's present tense perspective?
4. Men and women's experiences in the Holocaust varied—what can you attribute to that fact? What would have caused these discrepancies? (*The answer is in footnote 2 on p. 103 in print edition and footnote 13 in the digital edition.*)
5. a) There are many themes in this story. If you could pick out one theme what would it be? b) There are some very subtle themes (or motifs) that students might have missed, which can inspire the way they read the book. Common motifs might be hunger, love, hatred (I do steer students toward positive messages, as Rena was a very positive person.) However more subtle motifs that I used in the text include: color (you might have students discuss colors that are mentioned in the text and how that effects their imagination or reading experience.) The colors white and red have very specific meanings a) they are the colors of the Polish flag! But Rena also equivocated white with cleanliness and that meant freedom. The word *Lamentations* appear three times in the book—this is very personal to me—there is a dance that was choreographed by Martha Graham called *Lamentations*, and that is why that word appears in the text.
6. What do you think were some of the factors that helped keep Rena and Danka alive through Auschwitz? Rena would say they were simply lucky! But some elements you might discuss include: health (they were farmers, so physically very strong compared to city girls), love, hyper-alertness, etc. and of course luck! You might discuss the many moments when there were simply lucky.
7. What do you think compelled Rena to act so selflessly when it came to taking care of and providing for her sister? Was she acting out of the goodness of her heart, out of necessity, did her upbringing influence her behavior toward others?
8. The Kapo, Emma, saves Rena's life at one point. (when Rena let's the old women sit down and rest, an SS man says "her number is up." But Emma does not turn Rena in. This is an interesting discussion for more mature students. Look at the scene and look at Emma was in prison for, and ask your class to discuss what they think Emma might have done to save Rena? (It is extraordinary.)

9. Danka also helped Rena, and saved her life during the death march, how did their relationship help both to survive?
10. How does Rena's story change your attitude towards others who are different than you, whether they are a different religion or race, sexual persuasion?

WRITING EXERCISES:

1. a) Pick one scene that you feel particularly strongly about—a scene should have a beginning and end to it, but pick something that is only a page or two long. You don't want it to be too long. Now, pick any of the characters in that scene – EXCEPT FOR RENA! – and rewrite the scene from that person's perspective. You can use actual dialogue from the book and even a footnote to help develop your scene. You might even do some outside research to develop your character. Write this exercise in first person, "I wish Rena wouldn't walk home alone with Andrzej (that is Mama's voice). Allow yourself to imagine who this person was, what is your person thinking, feeling, what motivates him/her to take the actions he/she does?
b) Write about your process after you complete this exercise. How did you become the character—did you do anything special? Did this exercise change how you feel about the people in Rena's story now? Did it change how you read the story now? (*This is a wonderful creative writing exercise that often helps readers to connect to the story in an intimate way—so it is a good idea to do this early in the reading assignment.*)
2. After 9/11 Rena expressed concern for American-Muslims. She was worried that people would hurt them like the Jews were hurt in Europe. What do you think about that response and her statement: "I do not hate. To hate is to let Hitler win"? (*This is a good exam question*)

SENSORY EXERCISES: (*These are exercises Heather did to try and better understand the scenes she rendered into prose for Rena.*)

1. Many students have never fasted—if Yom Kippur falls during your unit, it is fun to try fasting for the day and to write about hunger, during their fast. You might suggest they try it as an extra credit exercise, if there is no fasting holiday (*though Ramadan and Lent are certainly options, as well*).
2. Imagine what a potato peel tastes like from Rena's description and write down your perceptions. Then take a potato peel and eat it—how does it really taste?
3. Students generally don't like this exercise but it makes for a real sense of bonding among students, as they eat their stale bread, unsweet tea, potato peel, cold soup, etc...
 - a) Get together some stale bread, mustard, weak tea (no sugar), and eat it for breakfast. Are you full? What does it taste like? (*Funny enough, when I tried this and shared it with Rena, she told me my stale bread tasted good to her, it wasn't nearly bad enough!*)
 - b) Make some watered down potato soup (eat it cold and with no seasoning), what's that taste like (*Rena told me my Potato soup was too good for this exercise, even when it was watered down.*)
 - c) Lastly, make some macaroni and when it is done, sip the water—for years after Auschwitz, Rena would secretly sip her pasta water and think how wonderful it tasted. How does the noodle broth really taste?
**Give time to each portion of food, to taste and consider what it was like to eat almost nothing but that stale bread and watery soup (which is going to be better than what she was served) for three years and forty-one days.*

Group Exercise: *(from footnote 11 on p.151 in the print edition and footnote 24 in the digital edition)*

Have your reading group or class line up and march outside. No one should be allowed coats, etc., make it abrupt—before exiting the building make sure they understand that any giggling, talking, etc., is punishable by “death”. Simulate “Roll Call” by using a mean voice and glaring at them, order them to line up in rows of five, five wide, five deep (you can make it smaller if the group has just a few people in it). Have them stand for five minutes at full attention, and remind them how many hours every day Rena stood just like this, no matter what the weather. Then order them to line up for a mock selection. Using a stop watch, or counting “one-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand” give them each three seconds to stand in front of you before giving them the thumbs up sign allowing them to enter the building. (

Make sure everyone is selected for life, you will be able to tell which students believe you will select them and that allows for interesting discussion: why did you think I would select you? Often, I hear “because I am Muslim, short, thin, failed the last test...”)

Give students time to process this experience through writing and discussion.

If you don’t have a group, stand still for ten minutes and allow yourself to imagine what it was like to that for 2 hours twice a day. Pick a day when the weather is inclement, how do you stand still for so long? What do you have to do?

For teachers interested in using media in their classrooms, your students can now hear what a vivacious and amazing woman Rena was, where they can hear her voice and see her, not only cry but laugh. The lecture is in parts on Youtube, but can be found most easily through our website: www.renaspromise.com.