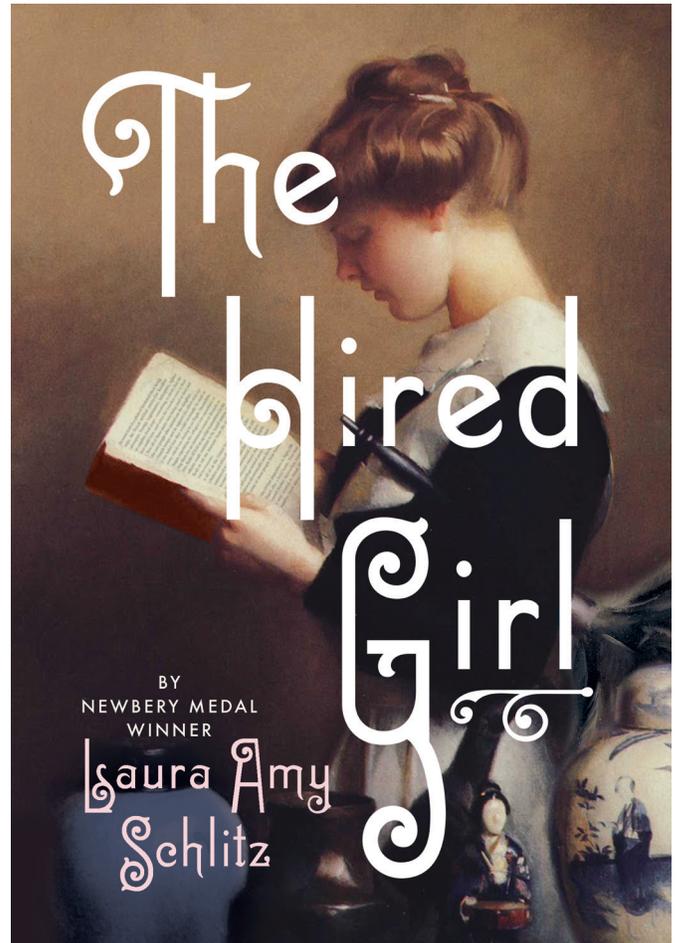


The Hired Girl

Laura Amy Schlitz

ABOUT THE BOOK

Fourteen-year-old Joan Skraggs pours out her heart and her dreams for the future in her new diary. She yearns for the drama and romance she reads about in her favorite novels, not the toil and loneliness she endures on her family's farm in Pennsylvania. So in the summer of 1911, she runs away. In Baltimore, she tells herself, a hard worker can find a job as a hired girl in a fine home, a handsome salary of six dollars a week, and maybe, just maybe, a future of her own making. Inspired by her grandmother's journals, Newbery Medalist Laura Amy Schlitz brings her sharp wit and keen eye to an irrepressible teenager's journey from the muck of the chicken coop to the marvels of book-filled homes, electric carpet sweepers, and new ideas — some of them very confusing.



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COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the Reading Literature standards for Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the Speaking and Listening standards for Comprehension and Collaboration and for Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used as writing prompts for independent work.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. “I know I’m not nothing,” Joan writes while she’s still living on the farm (page 36). What is the source of her self-confidence? How did her mother and teacher foster it? Why can’t her father and brothers extinguish it?
2. Why does Mr. Skraggs burn his daughter’s books? What does he fear reading will do to her? Is he right? Why or why not?
3. Why does Joan rename herself when she arrives in Baltimore? What does she gain by choosing her own name?
4. “She is utterly without guile,” Mrs. Rosenbach says of Joan (page 94), “a stranger in a strange land.” What does Mrs. Rosenbach mean? Have you ever felt like a stranger in a strange land? Do you think Mrs. Rosenbach ever felt like one?
5. Why is Malka reluctant to share her housekeeping duties with a non-Jew? Why does Father Horst think Joan should work for a Catholic family?
6. Joan had never met a Jew or heard the word “anti-Semitism” before she went to Baltimore. What does living with the Rosenbachs teach her about the city’s Jewish population? What does she discover about anti-Semitism in Baltimore and beyond?
7. Social class separates Joan from the Rosenbachs perhaps even more than religion. How are hired girls supposed to behave? What are the penalties for breaking the rules?
8. Joan prays regularly to the Blessed Mother. “Sometimes she answers me back,” Joan writes (page 6), “though I’m never sure if the voice is hers or Ma’s, or if the whole thing is my imagination.” What do you think?
9. Alone in a chapel at Corpus Christi Church, Joan realizes, “I have to be a Catholic” (page 354). How would you describe what happens to her there?
10. “I’m sure I ought to feel repentant about not loving Father, but I don’t,” Joan insists (page 212). Why can’t Joan love her father? Should she? Why or why not?
11. What does Mr. Rosenbach love about America? Why do his daughter’s in-laws criticize him for being “too *Amerikanisch*” (page 356)?
12. Discuss Mr. Rosenbach’s relationship with Joan. How is it different from his wife’s relationship with the hired girl?
13. Running away from home has always been dangerous, especially for a fourteen-year-old girl. At what points in *The Hired Girl* does Joan narrowly avoid disaster? Is she lucky? Or does she make her own luck?

14. What qualities does Joan share with modern American teenage girls? In what ways is she thoroughly of her own time?
15. What does Mimi realize immediately about Joan? Why does she think of Joan as a friend, not as a servant? What traits do the two girls share?
16. “You think of yourself as a member of this family,” Mimi says to Joan (page 327) “as if you’re almost Jewish. But you’re not. You’ll never be one of us.” Why is this so hurtful for Joan to hear? Why could she never be David’s wife?
17. “The world’s changing — not for the better, if you ask me — but in these crazy modern times,” Malka says (page 376), “a girl can be anything. A doctor, even.” What do you think Joan’s career will be? Will Mimi end up running Rosenbach’s Department Store?
18. At the very beginning of the book, when Joan receives her new diary, she vows to “write in it with *truth and refinement*” (page 3). By the end of *The Hired Girl*, has she kept that promise? Why or why not?
19. The novel takes place in America during the turn of the previous century. Some of the characters are very old-fashioned; others are more attracted to modern ways. Which characters are wedded to tradition? Which are eager to embrace novelty? Where does Joan stand?
20. Joan begins the novel lamenting the lost opportunity to get an education, and she ends it rejoicing because she’s about to go to school. In between, she falls in love with David Rosenbach. As a reader, were you disappointed that Joan’s first love affair ended in heartbreak (and recovery)? Would you have rather had the book end with her engagement to David? Why or why not?
21. Joan uses the phrase “real life” in two opposite ways. She thinks of it as taking place in the Swiss Alps or Venice, and she imagines it to be highly colorful and exciting; she’s longing for her “real life” to begin. But she also wonders why “real life” (that is, her life) can’t be more like the opera. Like many people, she is living two lives: one full of housework and waiting, and another that is marked by emotional peaks and valleys (her visit to the opera, her father burning her books). Which is more real? What is Joan’s real life?



photo by Joe Rubino

ABOUT LAURA AMY SCHLITZ

Winner of the Newbery Medal for *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* and a Newbery Honor for *Splendors and Glooms*, Laura Amy Schlitz is a school librarian as well as a *New York Times* best-selling writer. She was born in Baltimore and still makes her home in the area.