

The Day of the Pelican

The Day of the Pelican by Katherine Paterson
A Guide for Book Group Discussion & Classroom Use

About the Book

The Serbs always made it plain they hated Albanians, but Meli could never have imagined anything so terrible: the entire Jashari family, seventy people, massacred by the Serbs. Now all Albanians in Kosovo are in danger. Meli and her family must leave their home and store, taking only a few possessions. The refugees have their courage and resilience tested at every turn as they travel through the mountains and towns in search of a safe haven. They go days without food and water; they walk dangerous roads at night and carry Granny in a wheelbarrow; they live in crowded tent cities; they are in constant fear for their lives.

Meli blames herself for their situation; she believes the day she and her best friend misbehaved in class was what caused her brother's disappearance. *If only I had not drawn that stupid picture of Mr. Uka looking like a pelican, Mehmet would not have been arrested and we would all be safe and warm in our beds right now.*

If it weren't for Mama's and Baba's efforts to keep the family together, who knows what would happen to them.

Interview with the Author

1. What kind of research did you have to do about Kosovo and its history to write this story?
2. Were the experiences of the Lleshi family based upon those of a real-life refugee family from Kosovo?
3. What did you find was most difficult about telling this story?

Pre-Reading Activities

In an atlas, find a map of Europe and locate Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia.

In an online or print encyclopedia, look up articles on the following subjects: ethnic cleansing, Bill Clinton, Slobodan Milosevic, Kosovo Liberation Army, and NATO.

Discussion Guide

1. **"They weren't looked down on like gypsies or hated like Serbs, but still, there is a difference, and she and Zana knew it and shared it."** (p. 1) Why are Meli and Zana looked down upon in their town? Have you ever looked down upon someone as an "outsider" or known someone who has? What were the circumstances?
2. **"Why do the Serbs hate us so?"** (p. 2) What is the answer to this question Meli asks herself? What are some examples of how Serbs treat Meli's family and other Albanians in Kosovo? What are some examples from your own experience or from history in which people are persecuted for their ethnicity or religious beliefs?
3. Why is Meli resentful of the way her father and uncle treat her older brother, Mehmet?
4. Uncle Fadil brings Meli's family news of the massacre of the Jashari family. He wants Meli's father to move everyone to the family farm. Why is Meli's father so reluctant to leave? What finally persuades him to leave? Would you do the same under similar circumstances?



5. Why does Meli blame herself for Mehmet's disappearance? What does this reveal about her character?
6. What happened to Mehmet during the time he went missing? How does the experience change him?
7. When they learn it is too dangerous to stay at the farm, Meli's family hides in the mountains with the KLA and other refugees. What are some things Meli realizes she has taken for granted? What are some things you would miss most if you had to leave your home and most of your possessions behind? What would you do to try to keep your family together under such harsh and dangerous conditions?
8. *"If I had just not drawn that stupid picture of Mr. Uka looking like a pelican, Mehmet wouldn't have been arrested, and we would all be warm and safe in our own beds right now."* (p. 41) Meli says this to herself when the family is forced to go to the mountains. Do you agree with Meli? Is her drawing of the picture the cause of all that happened to her family? Why is she blaming herself? Would everything that happens to the family have happened regardless of the picture?
9. What changes does Meli see in Mehmet when they go to the mountains and he spends time with the KLA? How does Meli's father react to these changes?
10. When negotiation attempts fail and fighting escalates between the Serbs and the KLA, NATO begins a bombing campaign against the Serbs. Meli is shocked at how jubilant Mehmet is over NATO bombing the Serbs. Do you agree with Mehmet's desire for revenge? What happens as a result of the bombings?
11. What happens when the masked men come to the farm? How would you react if armed men stole all of your possessions and forced you out of your home at gun point?
12. When Meli is waiting on the platform for the train to arrive for refugees, she tries **"not to think about the stories she'd read in school about trains that took people to concentration camps and death."** (p. 71) What is Meli trying not to think about? How are the experiences of Meli and her family similar to those of Jews and other minorities who were persecuted and killed in Europe during the Holocaust? Are there examples in American history in which racial and ethnic groups have been treated in ways similar to Meli and her family?
13. What is life like for Meli's family in the refugee camp? How is it an improvement over what they have had to endure over the past year?
14. Meli's father says, **"War is madness. It is always the innocent who suffer most."** (p. 86) Do you agree? What are some examples of how the innocent have suffered most in this story?
15. Why is Meli afraid to tell her father how she has come to feel about the Serbs? Would you feel the same way if you had to live through what she experienced?
16. Why does Meli's father believe his family will be safer in America than in Kosovo? Do you think he is making the right decision?
17. What are some of the difficulties Meli's family have in adjusting to life in America? How are their beliefs and customs different from those of most Americans? Do you know anyone who has immigrated to the United States? What has their experience been like compared to Meli's family?
18. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, how are Meli and Mehmet treated by students at school? Why are they treated this way? How is their treatment similar to what they experienced living in Kosovo?
19. Why is Meli particularly worried about the way Mehmet responds to being bullied? What does the community do to reassure the Lleshi family that they will be welcome and safe?
20. In what ways does Meli change in the course of the story? How does she come to feel about living in America? What do you think the future holds for her and Mehmet?

Curriculum Connections

History

In the novel, Meli's father explains to Isuf that until the Turks came all Albanians were Christian. He is referring to a time when present-day Turkey was the center of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire controlled a sizable portion of southeastern Europe, including Albania, for several centuries. One legacy of that occupation was the introduction of Islam. Research and report on which present-day European countries were once part of the Ottoman Empire.

Language Arts

As both a pre and post-reading activity, come up with a list of statements relevant to the book, e.g., "Family means everything," "Revenge is a kind of justice," "I would never live in another country". Read the statements and ask students to place themselves on a continuum across the room with positions such as "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "strongly disagree." Follow with a discussion of the reason for their choices and changes, if any.

In pairs or small groups, create a picture dictionary with important phrases English language learners like Meli and Mehmet can use to help them assimilate to school.

Social Studies

Review the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>) and identify which of the Lleshi's rights were violated.

The Lleshi family is Muslim. Some of their customs are rooted in their religious beliefs. Research the basic tenets of Islam and identify which of the family's customs that are rooted in that faith.

Locate an agency or organization in your area that assists with the relocation of refugees and ask for a representative to speak to your class about their work.

In small groups or pairs, research and report on an article about refugees posted within the last year on Amnesty International (<http://www.amnesty.org>) or Human Rights Watch (<http://www.hrw.org>).

About the Author



Katherine Paterson is the recipient of the 2006 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award and the 1998 Hans Christian Andersen Author Award, and a two-time Newbery Medal winner and National Book Award winner. She lives in Barre, Vermont, with her husband, John, and is the mother of four children and the grandmother of seven.

Visit Katherine Paterson on her website: www.terabithia.com

This guide was created by Edward T. Sullivan, a librarian and author who has written many articles about and reviews of children's and young adult books. Visit his web site at www.sully-writer.com.



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