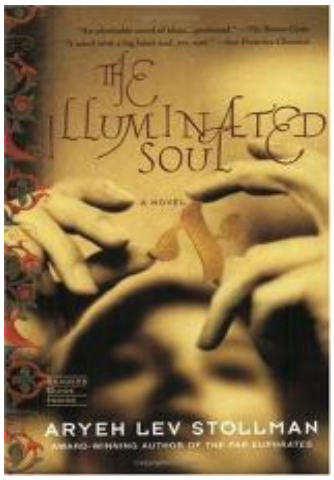
Illuminated Soul

by Aryeh Lev Stollman



About the Book

One June, a few years after the Second World War, a priceless possession comes into the lives of an ordinary family in Windsor, Canada. It is a rare fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript called the **Augsburg Miscellany**, smuggled out of Europe at great risk?and at tragic cost. Filled with Hebrew teachings from the most ancient holy books, it offers the family a new experience of the world and its possibilities. And, for young Joseph, it illuminates the secret places of his own soul, with life-changing consequences.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the importance of Eva's inventing the veil for Asa so that he can protect his eyes and see. What role does Eva play in helping each family member to see the world in new ways?

2. Discuss the transformative effect of Eva's stay on Joseph's character. Do you feel she is a good influence on him? What is her affect on the other members of the household?

3. Eva is a well-educated and experienced world traveler by the time she reaches Windsor. Yet, some of her actions would suggest a surprising naïveté. What role does this naïveté play in her becoming stranded in Canada? In her father's death? In her guarding of **The Augsburg Miscellany**? Is Eva's naïveté genuine, or is it a way to evade ultimate responsibility for her actions?

4. Insisting on the importance of perfection in the reading of the Torah, Joseph's mother remarks, "Once you start tampering with the truth, all is lost. Wars have, God help us, been fought over the interpretation of single words. We all make mistakes, boys, it's human nature, but then we are obligated to correct them. That's what God expects of us." What do you make of Joseph's taking **The Augsburg Miscellany** when Eva's back is turned? What motivates him to take it?

How does his own interpretation of the act change over the years? Does he feel he has made a mistake and, if so, how does he envision correcting it?

5. Eva often uses her fantastic stories to evade the Ivris' questions about her past. When pressed, she is not above lying. (For example, she lies to Joseph about her husband.) What does Joseph make of Eva's lies? How is he complicit in the stories she makes up about herself?

6. What role does guilt play in Joseph's lifelong love for Eva?

7. In what way (or ways) is Asa wiser than Joseph?

8. Is Joseph's erudition his own way of compensating for his lack of beauty? How does this relate to his feeling that he would avoid the troubles visited upon the beautiful?

9. Asa's hardship is his blindness. Eva's greatest burden (but also her greatest joy) is the **Augsburg Miscellany**. What is Joseph's ultimate hardship?

10. Joseph creates a character in his successful book and names her Soul. The world seems to be as captivated by her as he is by Eva. Why is this? What does the character of Soul represent to Joseph? To his readers?

11. After achieving early success in his neuroanatomical studies, Joseph goes on to achieve even greater success, late in life, with the publication of **The Illuminated Soul**. How are Joseph's interests in the brain and the soul related? How are they contradictory? What does Joseph make of the connection between his scientific and imaginative endeavors?

Author Bio

Aryeh Lev Stollman grew up in Windsor, Ontario, where his father was a rabbi for forty years. Stollman studied the Talmud for two years before coming to New York City to attend Yeshiva University. After graduating from Yeshiva, Stollman chose to embark on a career in medicine, attending medical school at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. He then did his residency in radiology at Mt. Sinai Hospital and his fellowship in neuroradiology at New York University. He is currently an interventional neuroradiologist in New York City.

Stollman has had works published in *Story*, *The Yale Review*, *American Short Fiction*, and *Tikkun*, among other publications. He also has a command of German and Hebrew.

Critical Praise

"[A] thoughtful, resonant examination of Jewish life in the aftermath of the Holocaust?Stollman illuminates the mysteries of life with the clear eye of a scientist and the faith of a believer."

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