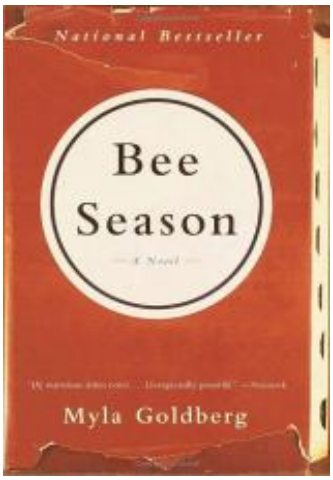
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Bee Season

by Myla Goldberg



About the Book

Eliza Naumann, a seemingly unremarkable nine-year-old, expects never to fit into her gifted family: her autodidact father, Saul, absorbed in his study of Jewish mysticism; her brother, Aaron, the vessel of his father's spiritual ambitions; and her brilliant but distant lawyer-mom, Miriam. But when Eliza sweeps her school and district spelling bees in quick succession, Saul takes it as a sign that she is destined for greatness. In this altered reality, Saul inducts her into his hallowed study and lavishes upon her the attention previously reserved for Aaron, who in his displacement embarks upon a lone quest for spiritual fulfillment. When Miriam's secret life triggers a familial explosion, it is Eliza who must order the chaos.

Myla Goldberg's keen eye for detail brings Eliza's journey to three-dimensional life. As she rises from classroom obscurity to the blinding lights and outsized expectations of the National Bee, Eliza's small pains and large joys are finely wrought and deeply felt.

Not merely a coming-of-age story, Goldberg's first novel delicately examines the unraveling fabric of one family. The outcome of this tale is as startling and unconventional as her prose, which wields its metaphors sharply and rings with maturity. The work of a lyrical and gifted storyteller, **Bee Season** marks the arrival of an extraordinarily talented new writer.

Discussion Guide

1. Eliza Naumann has "been designated . . . as a student from whom great things should not be expected" [p. 1]. How does Myla Goldberg use both humor and poignancy to bring home the impact of this judgment on a child? Does Eliza accept her "mediocrity" without question? What evidence is there that she resents (or is frustrated by) the way the teachers and other students, as well as her own family, perceive her?

2. Why does Eliza slip the information about the district spelling bee under Saul's door, rather than telling him about it in person? Is her behavior unusual for an eleven-year-old? How do Aaron's and Saul's reactions to Eliza's winning the district bee and moving on to the regional finals [p. 43] shed light on Eliza's own feelings about the significance of her newly discovered talent?

3. Initially, Saul is portrayed as an involved and caring father. What hints are there that his interest in his children's lives masks a need to satisfy his own ego? How does his relationship with Miriam enhance the image he has created for himself? Is Miriam in some ways a victim of Saul's determination to take the primary role in the family or is she equally responsible for the pattern they have established? In what ways do the dynamics of the Naumanns' marriage reflect the times in which they live?

4. Before the depth of Miriam's problem is revealed, how do you respond to her as a character? Do her ostensible involvement with work and her treatment of her children make her a "bad" mother? What incidents, if any, demonstrate that at some level she wants to express her love for Eliza and Aaron?

5. Are the interactions between Aaron and Eliza typical of sibling relationships, or are they closer than most brothers and sisters? If so, what contributes to their closeness? At what point does the pattern they have established begin to change?

6. "Saul Naumann spends the first portion of his life as Sal Newman, son of Henry and Lisa Newman, decorator of Christmas trees and Easter eggs" [p. 10]. When he embraces Judaism as a teenager under his mother's guidance, Saul becomes estranged from his father. What effect does Saul's childhood have on how he approaches parenting and the goals he sets for Aaron? As the only child of a wealthy couple who wanted a large family, Miriam is raised to fulfill all her parents' expectations. What does Saul offer her that her own parents were unable to provide? Goldberg writes, "The two bond over their mutual lack of family ties" [p. 22]. How do their assumptions about marriage and, later, their behavior with Eliza and Aaron belie the notion that they are free of the legacies of their own parents?

7. In addition to his desire to achieve a higher level of spirituality, why does Saul devote so much time to his studies of Jewish mysticism? Do his retreats into his study serve another purpose, either conscious or subconscious, in his life? Is the time he spends with Aaron early in the book and later with Eliza compensation for--or relief from--his self-imposed isolation?

8. Discuss the development of Eliza's enchantment with spelling. Is she driven by more than just the desire to please her father? How does the author use metaphors and other literary devices to extend the meaning of what is happening to Eliza at each stage? For example, what does Goldberg mean by the sentence, "When Eliza studies, it is like discovering her own anatomy" [p. 44] and her descriptions of Eliza's delightful characterizations of each letter [p. 49]?

9. When Eliza triumphs at the Greater Philadelphia Metro Area Spelling Bee, Miriam is struck with a sense of pain as she "realizes too late that she has made her daughter more like her than she ever intended" [p. 59]. Saul, in contrast, feels gratitude and humility; he "would like to think he has kept his distance in order to protect his daughter from his unfulfilled hopes" [p. 61]. Is this self-deception on Saul's part? How do you think Eliza would respond to her parents' feelings?

10. Why is Eliza's failure to appreciate Miriam's gift of the kaleidoscope so devastating to Miriam [p. 67]? Would the situation have been different if Miriam had explained its importance to her? Why doesn't she?

11. Eliza's transformation from ordinary student into nationally recognized spelling prodigy undermines the roles Aaron and Miriam have always assumed in the family and sets in motion events that destroy the Naumanns' façade of contentment and normalcy. Is there a common thread that links Aaron's experiments with different religions, Miriam's secret excursions, and Eliza's plunge into Jewish mysticism? In what ways do each of their quests embody the Jewish principle of *Tikkun Olam*, "the fixing of the world" [p. 87]? What parallels are there between the rituals they perform, the risks they take--and the revelations they receive?

12. What does Miriam's sudden sexual aggressiveness symbolize? What does it represent in terms of her feelings about Saul and their marriage? How is it related to the other signs of her increasing recklessness? Despite his discomfort and shock, why is Saul reluctant to discuss it, choosing instead to sleep in his study? Why does he convince himself "that he is there for Eliza's sake" [p. 186]? What are other examples of his unwillingness to face the profound changes occurring in the family?

13. Eliza masters arcane skills and grasps mysteries that few people in history have even dared to examine, yet she remains a typical little girl in many ways. How does Goldberg bring this to life in her descriptions of Eliza's thoughts and actions? She writes, "Abulafia's words speak to Eliza like a promise" [p. 195]. How do Eliza's studies, of both spelling and mysticism, relate to the concrete facts of her life and the promises she hopes will be fulfilled?

14. Describing Saul's reaction to the room Miriam has constructed, Goldberg writes, "Saul starts finding it difficult to breathe. . . . When Saul starts to cry, it is out of this sense of supersaturation as well as having arrived at a new level of understanding" [p. 225]. Does Saul live up to this "new level of understanding" when he sees Miriam at the hospital [pp. 235- 236]? When he discusses the situation with Eliza and Aaron?

15. How does Eliza's final act shed light on her character and the changes she has undergone in the course of the novel? Is it an act of defiance or of resolution?

16. Bee Season presents the narrative viewpoints of all the family members. How does this technique add depth and nuance to our understanding of each character? How do the self-portraits differ from the portraits, implicit or explicit, sketched by the other members of the family? Which characters become more sympathetic or appealing through this juxtaposition of perspectives and which ones become less so?

17. The book opens with quotations from the mystic Abulafia and spelling champion Rebecca Sealfon. It is clear how they relate to Eliza's life; in what ways are they relevant to the other characters in the novel and the themes Goldberg explores?

Author Bio

Myla Goldberg is the bestselling author of FEAST YOUR EYES, THE FALSE FRIEND, WICKETT'S REMEDY and BEE SEASON, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book, winner of the Borders New Voices Prize, and a finalist for the Hemingway Foundation/PEN award, the NYPL Young Lions award, and the Barnes & Noble Discover award. It was

adapted to film and widely translated. In addition to her novels, she has written an essay collection, a children?s book and short stories that have appeared in *Harper?s*. She teaches in the fiction programs at Sarah Lawrence and NYU, and has been known to sing and play accordion and banjo in the Brooklyn art-punk band The Walking Hellos. She was also the subject of a song by The Decemberists, ?Song for Myla Goldberg.? She lives in Brooklyn with her husband Jason Little and their two daughters.

Critical Praise

"A marvelous debut novel. . . . Imagine a Jewish Ordinary People and then some. . . . Unexpectedly powerful."

Bee Season

by Myla Goldberg

Publication Date: May 15, 2001
Genres: Religion & Spirituality
Paperback: 275 pages
Publisher: Anchor
ISBN-10: 0385498802
ISBN-13: 9780385498807