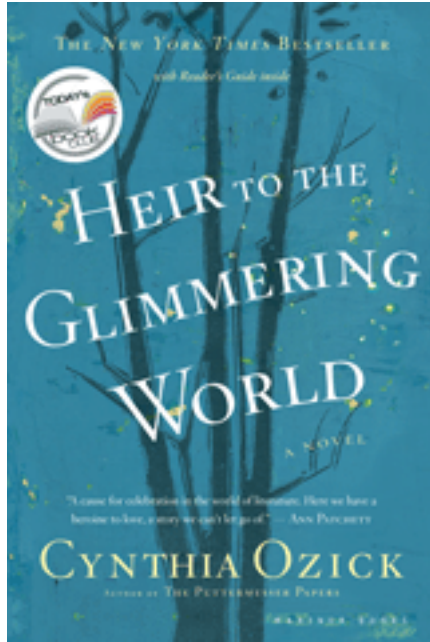


A Reader's Guide



Heir to the Glimmering World

by Cynthia Ozick

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About the Book

A *New York Times* Bestseller
A *Today Show* Book Club Selection
Finalist for Book Sense Book of the Year

"A cause for celebration in the world of literature. Here we have a heroine to love, a story we can't let go of, gorgeous sentences, and ideas to wrestle with. I didn't just read this book, I devoured it." — Ann Patchett, author of *Bel Canto*

About the Author

Cynthia Ozick is one of America's most prominent women of letters, acclaimed for her many works of fiction and criticism. Ozick was a finalist for the National Book Award for her previous novel, *The Puttermesser Papers*, which was named one of the top ten books of the year by the *New York Times Book Review*, *Publishers Weekly*, and the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. She received the National Book Critics Circle Award for her essay collection *Quarrel & Quandary*. Ozick's work has been translated into thirteen languages worldwide. Her classic novella *The Shawl* was produced for the stage in New York, directed by Sidney Lumet.

"[Cynthia Ozick] has magical gifts as a storyteller . . . a distinctive and utterly original voice." — *New York Times*

"One of the finest and most imaginative writers of our time." — *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Questions for Discussion

1. With the brisk pace of its plot, its plucky teenaged heroine, and its tidy, satisfying conclusion, *Heir to the Glimmering World* may be read as an update of the nineteenth-century novel. How does Ozick allow this old-fashioned literary style to resonate in a twentieth-century story? What ironies are present in Ozick's novel that would be absent from a Victorian novel? *Heir to the Glimmering World* ends in 1937; how does your knowledge of the world events of the next decade affect your perception of the ending?
2. How do Rosie's actions differ from the actions of, for instance, a character from her beloved Jane Austen or Charles Dickens, and how might she behave differently if the story were to take place today?
3. Herr Mitwischer cites an Arab proverb: "The wise man speaks of ideas, the middling man of actions, the fool of persons." In her novel, Ozick "speaks" of all three. How does she make *Heir to the Glimmering World* work on different levels — as pure entertainment driven by plot and character and also as a novel of ideas? What elements of the novel did you find most engaging?
4. While the novel hinges on some tragic turns of event, it is also bracingly funny. How would you describe the overall tone of the book?
5. The title *Heir to the Glimmering World* invokes the primary theme of inheritance. How is each character shaped by the legacy of the past he or she has inherited? How do their respective fortunes or misfortunes affect Rose, James, and the Mitwischer children? Who, in your opinion, is the ultimate, truest heir to the glimmering world?
6. When Rose begins to work for the Mitwissers, she seems bewildered at being employed by such sophisticated intellectuals: a religious scholar and an experimental physicist. In the course of her employment with the Mitwissers, she comes to view them as the complex and imperfect people that they are. Why and how does her attitude toward them change? What events or observations deepen her understanding of them?
7. *Heir to the Glimmering World* is filled with characters who are abandoned and dispossessed, characters who are running away or are made to run away. How are Ozick's characters refugees, in the literal and figurative sense?
8. As a result of the changes in Hitler's Germany, Elsa Mitwischer has lost her appointment at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute, her career, her home, and possibly her sanity. In response, she effectively removes herself from the world, yet she remains acutely aware of the activities of her family. Is her lunacy an act? What would she gain or lose from such an act?
9. Ozick writes of James A'Bair's childhood, "He was not a normal boy . . . he was his father's drawing, his father's discourse, his father's exegesis of a boy . . . his father had interpreted him for the world." James has unhappily tried his whole life to cast off an identity created by his father. Similarly, Rose is running away from her past and Ninel tries to invent a new identity for herself. Are Ozick's characters ultimately successful in their pursuits? How are we burdened by others' perceptions of us? How do we all in some ways invent our own identities?

10. On the surface, James A'Bair appears to sweep whimsically through life; he drifts effortlessly into the lives of the Mitwissers, for instance. Yet he is a character with a deeply troubled soul. How does Ozick reveal the two sides of James A'Bair? Do his troubles undermine his likability? Do you find yourself sympathizing with him? Why does Elsa offer only vehement disapproval of him? Do you think his fate is inevitable? Why or why not?

11. One key theme of the book is the power of interpretation: the validity of it, the necessity of it, and also the inaccuracy of it. How do both Rudi's and James's lives revolve around the idea of interpretation? Do you believe the Karaites' rejection of all interpretation is defensible? How does this theme resonate in other ways in the novel?

12. Professor Rudolf Mitwischer's professional studies center on religion, yet he does not seem a particularly faithful man. Religion hardly factors into his family life. Do you find this odd? What does this say about Herr Mitwischer?

13. In his theater days, James offers money to bribe an indifferent child to learn to read. What does this action say about his complicated attitudes toward books and literature, toward his fortune, and toward children?

14. Ozick prefaces *Heir to the Glimmering World* with an epigraph from Wallace Stevens: "The absence of imagination had/Itself to be imagined." How does this thought relate to the novel?

15. Many details in the novel offer significant comment on the worth and power of books, from Rosie's fondness for nineteenth-century novels like *Emma*, *Middlemarch*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Hard Times*, to Elsa's reaction to Jane Austen, to Rudi's joy at receiving a rare text, for example. What importance does literature have in the novel and in the world at large?

A Conversation with Cynthia Ozick

In *Heir to the Glimmering World*, there are several actual heirs, including the profligate James A'Bair — a character inspired by the son of A. A. Milne, creator of Winnie-the-Pooh. What was the source of this inspiration?

Some time ago I happened on the obituary of Christopher Milne, A. A. Milne's grown son, whom we know mainly through Ernest Shepard's indelible illustrations of a small boy in short pants. At his death he was the owner of a bookshop hidden away in the north of England, having attempted all his life to slough off his identification with Pooh and Eeyore and all the rest. He wanted to flee from the artifice of his father's creation: he longed to become an autonomous adult, to be a man, not the object of nostalgic pilgrimages to a living shrine not of his making. Or so I thought, reading that obituary notice. In my novel the character inspired by Christopher Robin is named James A'Bair, eventually to be dubbed the Bear Boy. The Bear Boy struggles to climb out of what Thomas Mann called "the well of the past," the past that has immured him in an imaginary childhood. His single-minded aim is to escape being costumed forever in lace collar and rouged knees, forever five years old.

Professor Rudolf Mitwisser, beneficiary of the Bear Boy's profligate ways, studies an ancient Jewish sect of scriptural literalists — they rejected all interpretation. How does Mitwisser's obsession relate to the Bear Boy?

It would be grandiose to call my novel a novel of ideas, but I hope I may venture that it is a novel of at least an idea: the idea of the necessity of interpretation, but also the danger of interpretation. What makes a human being? Language first, and then imaginative interpretation — the human mind cannot live without it. Like all literalists, the Karaites stood against imagination and interpretation, and they vanished out of history's mainstream. The author of the Bear Boy books weighed down his son with so much ineradicable embellishment that the man could never free himself from the invented boy. Whether interpretation is too little or too much, a withering will follow.

Aside from the underpinning of ideas, your novel is a delight to read with a delightful narrator, Rose Meadows. Does she see these thematic notions you've just described?

Hardly. She is only an untried motherless eighteen-year-old, carelessly abandoned by a feckless father. And anyhow, for the characters in any fiction, and above all for readers, theme is subterranean, implicit, unobtrusive, the invisible underside of the story. Rose, though, feels intelligently, and she is an acute observer: she takes things in while mostly standing apart. I compare her to the traditional Young Man from the Provinces, who enters, unprepared, into unsuspected complexities. She starts out as a witnessing eye, yet some of the complexities she encounters occur beyond her consciousness or view: the Spanish civil war, for instance, or incidents in Barcelona, Berlin, Cairo, Switzerland.

Is *Heir to the Glimmering World* a comedy or a tragedy?

The story ends with a wedding ring and a baby — the conventional requisites for comedy — so I suppose it can count as a comedy. Yet since world upheaval is pervasive, and there are three deaths, some may regard it as an anatomy of melancholy. But novels are only chronicles of human lives (even if those lives are invented) and merely retell our confusions of light and dark, of loss and promise. What matters, I think, is the conviction that something significant is at stake.

You've published four collections of essays and eight books of fiction. Which kind of writing are you more attracted to?

Definitely fiction. Fiction is all risk, all discovery, all confidentiality — even secrecy. Essay writing verges on being a public act and is driven more by the intellectual faculty than by the imaginative. But fiction . . . when I say secrecy, I mean not only the long, long immersion in privacy and isolation, and the wooing of phantoms out of the air, but those bodiless concealments and disclosures of language that lurk in certain turns of dialogue, or the turn of an eye, or a hand, or a shaft of sky. A watchfulness, an almost perilous vigilance. A novel can be written, so to speak, out of "sociology," and it will still be a novel. But when a novel's sinews are bound up in the most fearful intimations of language, when setting down a phrase feels tantamount to ingesting the blood of demons . . . just there is the difference between the safety of prose and the lusts of art: think of the haying scene in *Anna Karenina*, or the Marabar caves in *A Passage to India*. Call it language, call it intuition, call it seduction,

call it idea-as-emotion. It is a voluptuousness only the novel knows, and the elusive grail we poor scribblers helplessly chase.

For Further Reading

[Trust: A Novel](#)

"[Ozick writes] with the gusto of a virtuoso . . . Her fluency is endless." — *New York Times*

Money and conscience are at the heart of Cynthia Ozick's masterly first novel, narrated by a nameless young woman and set in the private world of wealthy New York, the dire landscape of postwar Europe, and the mythical groves of a Shakespearean isle. *Trust* is an epic tale of the narrator's quest for her elusive father, a scandalous figure whom she has never known.

In a provocative afterword to the Mariner paperback edition, Ozick reflects on how she came to write the novel and discusses the cultural shift in the nature of literary ambition in the years since.