

BOOKNOTES

EDUCATORS GUIDE

thematic connections

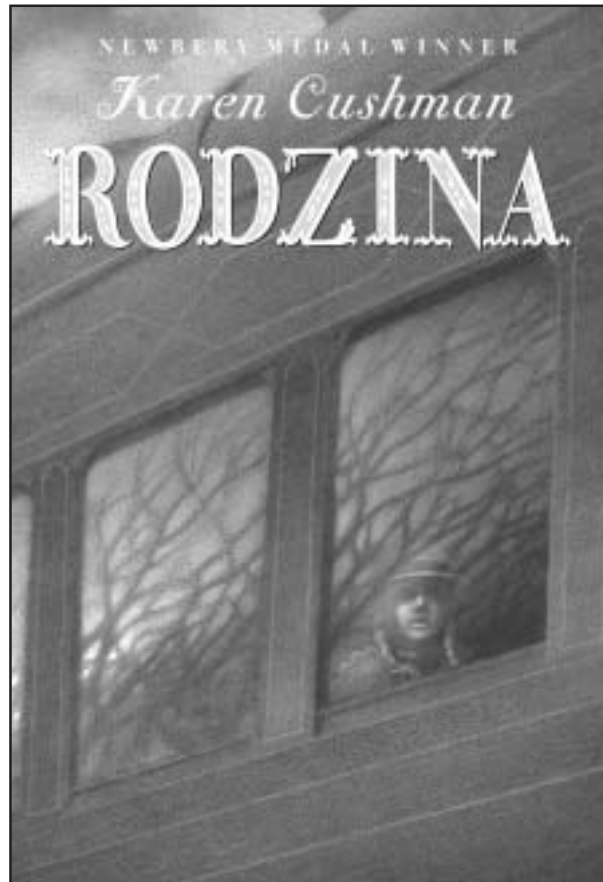
Abandonment
Survival • Family
Fear • Freedom • Prejudice

Grades 4 up

about the book

Twelve-year-old Rodzina Brodski begins a long journey aboard the orphan train that takes her from the streets of Chicago to an unlikely and surprising new home in San Francisco in 1881.

Rodzina Brodski is only 12 years old when she is swept off the streets of Chicago and put on the orphan train that is headed west. Like all of the street orphans, Rodzina is promised a nice family, but she isn't convinced that anyone will want a homely Polish girl. The train has barely begun its journey when Miss Doctor, the woman accompanying the orphans, places Rodzina in charge of the younger children. She resents this responsibility, but manages to get through the journey by holding on to the memories of her family. Rodzina is placed in a terrifying situation with a farm family near Cheyenne, and narrowly escapes a future of doom. Her courage and spunk lead her to the life she has wished for all along— independence and love from someone who might learn to care for her.



Dell Yearling • 0-440-41993-X

awards & reviews

Booklist Top 10 Historical Fiction for Youth

★ "Rodzina's musings and observations provide poignancy, humor, and a keen sense of the human and topographical landscape."

—Starred, *School Library Journal*

★ "A natural for American history or social studies classes, this is especially interesting as a woman's history title."—Starred, *Booklist*

Visit Teachers @ Random at www.randomhouse.com/teachers


RANDOM HOUSE
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

pre-reading activity

Ask students to do their own research and read about the Orphan Train Movement. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to debate why the orphan train was considered a good thing by some and controversial by others. Ask them to consider these points as they read *Rodzina*.

thematic connections

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Abandonment—There are children on the orphan train who aren't orphans. Rodzina thinks about these children, and says, "No matter how poor we were or what trouble there was, I never felt that my mama and papa didn't want me." (p. 38) How is not being wanted by one's parents a type of abandonment? At what point in the novel does Rodzina feel abandoned by Miss Doctor? Ask students to describe Miss Doctor's feelings of abandonment.

Adoption—Discuss why Miss Doctor wants Rodzina to know that Edgar Allan Poe and Leo Tolstoy were orphans. At what point in the novel does Rodzina "adopt" Miss Doctor? Think about the historical context of the novel, and discuss why it is unlikely that Miss Doctor legally adopted Rodzina. Contrast Rodzina's fate with that of the children on the orphan train.

Survival—Many of the orphans have survived on the streets of Chicago before they begin their journey west on the orphan train. Have students explain their survival skills. How do these skills serve them on the train? How does Joe use disguise as a means of survival? Ask students why they think some of the children prefer the streets to living with a family in the west?

Family—Have students describe Rodzina's family. How does she hold on to special memories of them? Discuss the motive of most of the families that take the orphans. Why does Mr. Clench want Rodzina? How does Mrs. Clench protect Rodzina from her husband? How are Lacey, Joe, and Sammy like a family to Rodzina? What makes Miss Doctor change her mind about sending Rodzina to the Boys' and Girls' Training School near San Francisco? How do Rodzina and Miss Doctor need each other?

Fear—Ask students to discuss why Rodzina feels that it's important not to reveal one's fear. What is Rodzina's greatest fear? How does she help the younger children deal with their fears? At what point in the novel is the reader most frightened for Rodzina? How does Rodzina escape this frightening situation?

Freedom—Rodzina's family left Poland because her papa believed that "poor freedom was better than rich slavery." (p. 41) Ask students to think about the fate of the children on the orphan train. Discuss whether Mr. Brodski would consider this a type of slavery. How does Miss Doctor use the orphan train to gain freedom for herself?

Prejudice/Bigotry—Mr. Szprot, the placing out agent, curses and screams at the orphans. He sometimes appears especially cruel to Rodzina. Discuss how he displays prejudice and bigotry when he addresses her as "Polish Girl." Ask students to find incidents throughout the novel where Rodzina suffers from prejudices against her heritage. How is Miss Doctor a victim of prejudice and bigotry?

connecting to the curriculum

Language Arts—The orphan train stops in Cheyenne, Wyoming, where the children are fed and entertained by local citizens. The winners of the school spelling bee spell the following words for the orphans: *forlorn*, *impoverished*, *destitute*, *uncertain*, and *outcast*. How do these words relate to the orphans? As a class, define these items, then instruct students to use these spelling words and write a brief article for the Cheyenne newspaper about the orphans.

The children travel through little towns with names like Dead Mule Junction, Wild Horse Ridge, Lick Skillet, Buck Snort, and Rotten Luck. Ask students to pick one of these names and write a legend about how the town got its name.

Social Studies—Charles Loring Brace, the founder of the Children’s Aid Society, was recognized for his radical and progressive ideas about services to poor and orphaned children. Ask students to research and read about Mr. Brace’s ideas. Then ask them to write an editorial either supporting or disputing his ideas for a New York newspaper.

Ask students to read the Author’s Note at the end of the novel. Then have them identify a bit of information (e.g., the English boys that were sent in 1618 to work on plantations in Richmond, Virginia) to do further research. Ask them to use their research and write a short paper that connects this information to the development of the current foster care system in the United States.

Health—Myrna Clench suffers from “galloping consumption,” and Rodzina’s mama died of the “putrid fever.” Ask students to research the causes and treatments of these diseases. Find out what other diseases plagued people in the late 1800s. Make a poster informing people of symptoms and treatments of these diseases that a local doctor might post to help prevention of these illnesses.

Math—Ask students to record all the towns on the orphan train route, beginning with the first stop in Grand Island, Nebraska. Use a map of the United States and determine the route of the train. Then have students use Map Quest (www.mapquest.com) and calculate the distance Rodzina and Miss Doctor traveled from Chicago to San Francisco.

Art—Rodzina and Miss Doctor become a family. Have students make cards that Rodzina and Miss Doctor might give to one another on their birthdays in the first year they are together.

Many of the people in the west who adopted children from the orphan train are farmers who live far away from towns. Discuss how they get the message about the orphan train. Then make a flyer or poster to hang in the train stations along the route that advertises the orphan train.



vocabulary/ use of language

Encourage students to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them taking clues from the context of the novel. Such words may include: *cahoots* (p. 35), *emigrants* (p. 37), *contentment* (p. 41), *panhandling* (p. 55), *vice* (p. 56), *defect* (p. 68), *frigid* (p. 135), *turrets* (p. 142), *persevered* (p. 177), and *hydrophobia* (p. 178).

related titles

by theme

Belle Prater's Boy

Ruth White

Abandonment

Adopted and Orphaned Children • Family

Grades 5–7 / 0-440-41372-9

Dell Yearling

Gib Rides Home

Zilpha Keatley Snyder

Abandonment • Family

Grades 5–7 / 0-440-41257-9

Delacorte Press

Journey

Patricia MacLachlan

Abandonment • Family

Grades 5–7 / 0-440-40809-1

Dell Yearling



Photo Credit: © Fred Mertz

about the author

Karen Cushman was born in Chicago, Illinois, and currently lives on Vashon Island, in Puget Sound. She has always been interested in history, and her desire to know what life was like for ordinary people in other times led her to write *Matilda Bone*; *Catherine, Called Birdy*, a Newbery Honor winner; and *The Midwife's Apprentice*, winner of the Newbery Medal. *Rodzina* is her fifth book.

internet resources

The Children's Aid Society

www.childrensaidsociety.org

A description of the history of the Children's Aid Society and the Orphan Train Movement.

The Orphan Train Children

www.kancoll.org/

[articles/orphans/or_homes.htm](http://www.kancoll.org/articles/orphans/or_homes.htm)

Provides a partial list of New York area institutions that the orphan train children came from.

on the web

For bios, teachers guides, and more . . .

Visit our FREE online site
Teachers @ Random

www.randomhouse.com/teachers