

Amy Kurzweil's "Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/amy-kurzweils-flying-couch-graphic-memoir>.

Introduction

Amy Kurzweil is a cartoonist, writer, and teacher. Her first book, *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir*, was published in 2016 to great acclaim. *Flying Couch* tells the story of three generations of women: the author herself, Amy, an imaginative and self-described anxious young woman; Amy's mother Sonya, a successful, prudent child psychologist who researches her family tree in her free time; and Amy's Bubbe (Sonya's mother), Lillian Fenster, a charming and eccentric Holocaust survivor born in Warsaw and now living alone in Michigan.

The narrative follows these three women's lives as they unfold in the early twenty-first century, with Amy's life at the center. Interwoven with the present day is Bubbe's traumatic story of surviving the Nazi occupation as a young girl and teen. The style of the illustration shifts with these two time periods; Kurzweil's signature bubbly, cartoonish drawings represent the present-day, while a more somber and gritty aesthetic, with austere type-set text, represents Bubbe's past. Kurzweil took the words for her grandmother's story directly from her grandmother's recorded oral history.

Flying Couch joins a growing canon of graphic novels that depict Holocaust testimonies, often examining the effect of this traumatic history on later generations from the perspective of a child or grandchild. Some of the most notable works in this category are Art Spiegelman's groundbreaking *Maus*, which received a Pulitzer Prize in 1992, Miriam Katin's *We Are on Our Own* (2006), and her follow up, *Letting It Go* (2013), and Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006). What makes Kurzweil's text unique is her careful depiction of three tangled matrilineal generations, with special emphasis on self-exploration and contemporary Jewish American identity.

Cover image: A still from the 2016 book trailer for Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir*.

Subjects

Graphic Novels and Comics, Holocaust, Memoir, Women Writers, United States

Reading and Background

- Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir* was published by Catapult in 2016. You can also read Hannah Baker Saltmarsh's review of the book in *Tikkun Magazine* as well as a brief interview between Kurzweil and Julia Purcell on *LitHub*.
- For more information about Amy Kurzweil, including links to her *New Yorker* cartoons, visit her [web page](#). In this [interview](#) with Lisa Newman for the Yiddish Book Center's podcast *The Shmooze*, Kurzweil gives a summary of *Flying Couch* and includes information about her grandmother's response to the book.
- For scholarly resources, consider the academic essay "Mapping transgenerational memory of the Shoah in third generation graphic narratives: on Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch* (2016)," by Dana Mihăilescu, published in the *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, Volume 17, Issue 1. For a foundational essay on using graphic novels and comics to tell stories of intergenerational trauma, see Marianne Hirsch's "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory" in *Discourse*, Volume 15, Number 2. For a summary of Hirsch's work on "postmemory," see "Review of *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, by Marianne Hirsch" by Tahneer Oksman, published in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, Volume 29, Issue 2.

Resources



The Great Jewish Books Teacher Workshop, a program of the Yiddish Book Center, is made possible with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. The Foundation, established in 2006, is devoted to fostering compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for youth and young adults in the U.S.

1: Video, official book trailer for Amy Kurzweil's "Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir," 2016.

The book trailer for *Flying Couch* is a short video featuring an interview between the story's author, Amy Kurzweil, and her grandmother, a central character in the book. The conversation is animated by Kurzweil's drawings, a visual pairing that emphasizes how *Flying Couch* is a mixture of direct testimony and imaginative interpretation. In this video, as in the book, Bubbe's words and story make up the content while Kurzweil, as interviewer and animator, steers the conversation. Kurzweil asks questions, edits and frames what is in the final cut, and shapes the visual content to emphasize or de-emphasize certain qualities about herself and her grandmother.

Suggested Activities: Begin by playing the video for students, but don't let them see the animation. Ask them to pay close attention to what they hear, and to jot down notes as they listen: what kinds of questions does Kurzweil ask her grandmother? Why does she include the introductory parts instead of editing these out—like the sound of the tape recorder turning on, or asking her grandmother if she understands what they are doing, or her grandmother's abrupt "huh?" Why does she include the music that she does? You might want to play the video (without letting them see it) two or three times. After you have discussed it as a class, put students into pairs. Have them write a 1- or 2-sentence description of Kurzweil, and then of her grandmother. What do we learn about each of them from listening to the interview?

Next, as a class, compare some of the descriptions and see if there are any discrepancies. What details from the interview (e.g., tone of voice, a piece of dialogue) are students using to support these descriptions? Does listening closely for a second or even third time change what they think of these two individuals? Did they develop new insights by listening to their classmates' descriptions?

Finally, let students watch the video. Ask them to jot down notes as they watch. Did they learn or experience anything differently from watching the video with the animation? Remind them that animation allows Kurzweil to create whatever setting she wants for this brief interview—she does not have to make it realistic—and it also helps her cement the tone. How would they describe this style of animation? Why did Kurzweil choose to include the details that she did (the photographs in the background, or the animated fireplace, for example)?

If you want to use this exercise as the start to a longer project, you might also discuss this video in terms of its being an advertisement for the book. Based on this video, what can readers expect from the book? If you have recently completed reading a book as a class, you could ask students, in small groups, to create their own trailers for that book. They can write scripts and decide what visuals they want to include in their trailers. Students can record these, or simply describe or perform them in front of the class. Afterwards, you might have them discuss or compare and contrast the different trailers.

Source: Directed by Timour Gregory, drawn by Amy Kurzweil, "Official Book Trailer for *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir*," YouTube, 29 Sept. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=98&v=UFLrZ4os9go.

2: Video, Amy Kurzweil's "Bubbe Sings a Jewish Song," 2017.

In this video, we hear Bubbe sing a short song in Yiddish. Her singing is accompanied by animations as well as some fragmented Yiddish text and translations. At the very end, Bubbe explains that the song is about love.

Throughout *Flying Couch*, the themes of song and language carry through Bubbe's oral testimony, often in complicated ways. Song, for Bubbe, is a kind of salve. When she is hiding out in the countryside, alone, far from her family, and pretending not to be Jewish in order to survive, she has to attend church every week. Though she is "scared" of church, she recalls how much she loved the singing (see page 98).

The Yiddish language, on the other hand, so intimately connected with her family and identity, is forbidden to her during this time. In hiding, Bubbe does not dare reveal her identity by speaking, or singing, in Yiddish. When she finally returns to the city, she describes trying "to say a little bit of Yiddish words to myself, but I was so scared. I couldn't do it. Even all alone like that, they were locked up inside me" (page 193).

When Bubbe finally turns to the story of "how I come to live Jewish again" (page 197), she describes meeting her husband, Dave, who took her to a house filled with Jewish families. There, she experienced Shabbat for the first time in four years. In addition, people told horrific stories about how they made it through the war, and they also filled the house with their song and dance. As she describes it, "And the music. The Jews were singing songs always. Yiddish music. Even the people coming from the camps.

Piles of women, so skinny, with no hair and wearing the striped suits, messes and messes of them, so sick, but always singing, dancing. That was our pleasure. To have music and to be no longer alone" (page 201).

Suggested Activities: Play the video of Bubbe singing, without showing students the visuals. Pause when she stops singing, before she describes what the song is about. Ask students for their reactions to the song: what do they think it is about? What emotions does it evoke? Once you've had a discussion, play them the entire video from beginning to end, and let them see the visuals. Did their interpretations match Bubbe's description? Did the fragments of translated lyrics help them make sense of the storyline? Did the visuals seem to match what the song was about, and how it felt to hear it?

Ask students if they can recall songs that were sung to them as children. (A brave student or two might even sing to the class.) Can they remember who sang the song to them? When did they first hear the song, and on what occasions was it repeated? Do they know where the song came from, or, especially if it's not in English, what it means? What associations do they have now with the song (these can include emotions, memories, or images), and with the person who sang it to them?

If you want to add a research component, you might have students look up the history of a song from their childhood: who wrote it and when and where? Was it popular, does it have an interesting origin story? They can additionally interview a person who sang it to them, if possible, or a living relative close to that person, to see if they can find out any additional information. What did the song mean to the person who sang it to them? Where did that person first hear it? Why might the song have had a special significance to them?

Source: Amy Kurzweil, "Bubbe Sings a Jewish Song," *YouTube*, 15 Dec. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkluKUjGjfl>.

3: Oral history excerpt, Lily Fenster, 1994.

As Kurzweil demonstrates throughout *Flying Couch*, and as she explains in interviews, her thesis project at Stanford, which eventually turned into the book, was inspired by her grandmother's oral history. That oral history was recorded during two long interviews with the historian Sidney Bolkosky, and it is available on the University of Michigan's Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive, with an added transcription. In *Flying Couch*, then, we have the result of an oral history being adapted and translated into scenes and images that have been edited, stylized, and paired with a modern-day story of intergenerational transmission and the search for Jewish identity.

Suggested Activities: Have students listen to this recording of Lillian (Lily) Fenster. In it, she describes returning to the ghetto to visit her mother during the period when Lily was hiding out in the country and pretending to be a poor, non-Jewish orphan. Have students take special note not only of the story's details, but also of how she chooses to tell the story. Do they notice any parts, for instance, where she slows down, or sounds more emotional? Are there pauses or repetitions? Was anything confusing? When does the interviewer interject, and why? Once they have listened to it, have the class collectively try to describe what was said, how it was said, and what else students learned about Lily's personality and experience from the interview.

Students can then compare this oral history to Kurzweil's interpretation of it on pages 157-160 of *Flying Couch*. Have students note which parts of the oral history Kurzweil used in her book and which parts she left out. How do Kurzweil's images, paired with the text, add to or help shape the story? What visual details or cues stood out here? In what ways does reading the interpretation of this history differ from listening to the original oral history? What are the similarities?

Source: Lily Fenster, interview by Dr. Sidney Bolkosky, November 8 and 10, 1994 (Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive, University of Michigan), <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/fenster/>.

4: Essay excerpt, "Unpacking My library," by Walter Benjamin, 1931.

This is a brief excerpt from the beginning of German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin's famous essay, "Unpacking My Library," written in 1931. Benjamin wrote the essay after divorcing his wife, and on the occasion of moving out of their house into his own apartment.

In *Flying Couch*, Amy Kurzweil traces her grandmother's traumatic history, including the story of having to leave her family and home behind carrying only a single extra pair of underpants. Kurzweil also traces her own journey from childhood to college to young adulthood. In these various settings, Amy and her family have the luxury of owning, displaying, and carrying what would have been an extravagance for her grandmother's family during the war and the Nazi occupation: books. Books often adorn the

background of the contemporary storyline in *Flying Couch*, sometimes as anonymous rectangular shapes but later, increasingly, as labeled works that clearly influenced the author/artist on her journey. Throughout *Flying Couch*, books represent everything from the search for one's Jewish identity to the preservation of a family history.

Suggested Activities: Read the excerpt from Benjamin. Ask students if they can pinpoint the tone of the piece: is it nostalgic? Optimistic? A mix of these? Why might Walter Benjamin have felt compelled to write about the process of unpacking his library at this moment in his life? Do you think he had a particular audience in mind for this piece?

Invite students to create a list of three to four pieces of media (these can include books, films, or television shows) that have played a significant role in their lives, for any reason at all. Ask them to write down those that immediately come to mind, without worrying too much about the reasons why. Once they have each come up with a list, have them write the associations they have with each. They should focus, as Benjamin does, mainly on memories, images, and feelings. Have them share their "media libraries" in pairs or small groups, and compare and contrast their different associations. What do these lists say about the roles that books, film, and television have had on their lives, both individually and as a classroom community?

You can also have students search for scenes in *Flying Couch* where books are visible. Have them look up the books, if they can read the titles and author names. Why might Kurzweil have chosen to include so many images of books in her book? Why these books?

Source: Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Boston: Mariner Books, 2019) 1.

5: Excerpt of a comic, Amy Kurzweil's "Crossing Over," 2018.

In her seven-page comic, "Crossing Over," Kurzweil chronicles a visit to the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City in the wake of the publication of her memoir, *Flying Couch*. She describes encountering the Holocaust survivor avatars that are part of a museum exhibition—three-dimensional, full-bodied holograms who respond to direct questions and give their Holocaust testimony to visiting crowds.

Throughout the piece, Kurzweil grapples with what it means to have joined what she describes as "The Holocaust Economy"—the exhaustive exhibits, books, films, and artworks that depict experiences of the Holocaust, that can be consumed or bought. She wonders at the various, often conflicting impulses, including guilt, shame, curiosity, and love, that lead people to create representations of such experiences, as she did in her book, or to partake in them, as she does here with her visit to the museum (and as we do, when we read her memoir). She also grapples with what it means to hear Holocaust testimony from an avatar created via virtual reality rather than directly from an individual.

Suggested Activities: You can have students read the **entire seven-page comic**, or you can ask them to focus on just the page excerpted here. Have the students consider the way the page is arranged in three tiers, with Kurzweil picturing herself in each. What is happening in each tier? What is happening between the tiers (what is *not* being depicted here)? Do they have any sense of what the narrator is thinking or feeling in each case? Be sure to also carefully discuss the various pieces of text throughout. What does the narrator mean by "Griefification"? Why does she include descriptions of the two avatars on the bottom, and why does she draw herself between them?

This discussion can easily lead to a larger conversation about different forms of Holocaust testimony, and different contexts for experiencing that testimony. Some examples might include firsthand listening (as in a personal interview), listening to a recording or reading a transcript, reading a graphic memoir, looking at photographs (in a museum, or in a photo album with a relative), or talking to a hologram. In what ways do the different mediums shape the experience of listening to someone's story? Do certain mediums or settings feel more authentic than others? Why or why not? What might be some problems or concerns in learning about the Holocaust now that most survivors have died?

Challenge students to think through some of their assumptions, especially those that might come up regarding online technology as an inauthentic medium. Why might this feel true? Is virtual reality somehow further from reality than a video recording, or an audio one? Why or why not?

Source: Amy Kurzweil, "Crossing Over," in *The Believer*, BelieverMag.com, August 1, 2018, <https://believermag.com/crossing-over/>.

