The Pushcart War
Study Guide

I. INTRODUCTION

This study guide aims to provide material to help in the preparation of a lesson, unit or book club discussion about the novel *The Pushcart War* by Jean Merrill. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the value *shalom*, peace, the theme of the Tishrei issue of BABAGANEWZ.

Through satire and humor, the novel tells the story of the fictional 1986 battle between pushcarts and trucks in New York City. Vying for supremacy on the streets of New York, the trucks declare war on the pushcarts that stand in their way; the pushcart peddlers launch their own attack in an effort to protect their source of livelihood and rid the city of traffic. The humorous plot and entertaining characters highlight lessons on what motivates war, how one leads others effectively, ways to attain compromise and strategies for pursuing peace.

To help plan for the study of the novel, this guide offers:

· questions for study and discussion
· passages for close analysis
· lesson ideas
· writing activities
· projects

Combine any components of the guide to help shape your lessons on the novel. You may also want to use the ideas in the guide as a means of offering enrichment and extra credit to students who wish to read the novel.

II. QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. In what year did the author actually write the novel? (1964) In what year does the author say she wrote the novel? (1996) When did the pushcart war begin? (1986) Why do you think there is a discrepancy between the dates?

2. Who is Professor Lyman Cumberly? Why is his foreword included in the book?

3. Whose side would you take in the war? Why?

4. Do you think that there is a side that the author wants you to take? How does she convey that message? Why do you think she wants readers to take one particular side?

5. What do you notice about the names of the pushcart peddlers listed on pages 53 and 54 (chapter 10)? (Their names reflect different ethnic backgrounds.) Why is it significant that the peddlers come from different backgrounds?

6. Discuss the names of the characters in the novel. What is the significance behind the names Mack, Moe Mammoth, Louie Livergreen, Maxie Hammerman, Mr. Jerusalem, Frank the Flower, etc.?

7. Why is Mr. Jerusalem such an important character? What is unusual about his lifestyle? How do his feelings and attitudes change over the course of the novel?

8. Which peddler do you think is most essential to the pushcart victory? Why?

9. Why do the children of New York engage in the pea attacks? What point about war in general do you think their participation makes?

10. Peace, or *shalom*, is not only the absence of war but is also a state of harmony. How do the last two chapters of the novel reflect that definition of peace? What aspects of the Pushcart Peace Conference help ensure harmony? How do the vignettes at the end of the novel illustrate the effects of the war and the ensuing peace?

11. Why does the novel end with Alice Myles?

12. What examples from Jewish history illustrate the same process of war that the pushcart war follows? What elements of the historical war are mirrored in the pushcart war? (The many in the hands of the few, the stronger and larger forces fall to the hands of the perceived weaker forces, etc.)

III. PASSAGES FOR CLOSE ANALYSIS

1. Page 11 (Introduction): "I have always believed that we cannot have peace in the world until *all of us* understand how wars start."

How does this help explain the author's reason for writing the novel?

2. Page 45 (chapter 8): "'I will tell you something else,' [Louie] says. 'And it is not something I am proud of. My own father was a pushcart peddler, and if I had not had the guts to get out and fight for myself, no matter who was in my way, I might be pushing a pushcart myself.'"

What does this passage reveal about Louie in particular and the trucks in general?

3. Page 48 (chapter 9): "The Community Reporter was always telling people about what 'people' wanted."

Who was the Community Reporter? What things did the Community Reporter say that make you suspicious of the Reporter's motives? How does the media, in general, play a role in the pushcart war?

4. Page 164 (chapter 26): "'And a king, Eddie Moroney,' Maxie said, looking very pleased with himself, 'a king takes care of his people in time of war. You should know that.'"

How does this statement express Maxie Hammerman's philosophy of war? What does it reveal about his character? What other examples from the novel reveal the same quality?

5. Page 221 (chapter 36): "By Hand"

Why is this the inscription on the base of the statue of General Anna? How does it reflect the way she led her fellow pushcart peddlers during the pushcart war?

IV. LESSON IDEAS

1. Post the word "satire" on the board and explain that satire is a style an author uses to make fun of a serious issue in an effort to bring about change. How is the novel a satire? In what ways does the author make fun of a serious issue? What change does the author hope to encourage? Is the satire effective? Why or why not?

2. Show students samples of political cartoons and explain their purpose. Ask students to assume a

position in the battle between the pushcarts and the trucks and draw political cartoons of the situation. As an alternative, clip political cartoons from various sources and ask students to write captions for them that apply to *The Pushcart War*.

3. As a class, analyze the language of war in the novel. Have students compile a list of the vocabulary in the novel with definitions that relate to war. How does the author use this language? What effect does it have on the novel?

4. Discuss the role of a leader in war. Who are the leaders for the different sides in the battle? Compare the leaders for the pushcarts to the leaders of the trucks. What are the leaders' attributes that make them worthy to lead? Ask students who they think are the more effective leaders. Why?

V. WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. The media plays a large role in the novel. Invite students to join ranks with the media by writing their own newspaper articles about the pushcart war.

2. An alternative: distribute assignments for students to create in-depth newscasts about the war. Students may want to profile a leader, do a retrospective on the causes of the war, investigate the Frank the Flower phenomenon, cover a specific battle, write an expose on the pea tack industry, etc. Have students write their news stories and then video tape them for a Pushcart War documentary or news special.

3. In the novel, the author includes a number of "primary sources" to support her depiction of the pushcart war. These sources include Buddy Wisser's blow-up of the daffodil picture, Joey Kafflis' diary entries and the Portlette Papers. Have students write other primary sources that they have "discovered" from the war: pages from Big Moe's datebook; Maxie Hammerman's sketches of pushcart designs; excerpts from Frank the Flower's and/or Mack's journals from jail; transcripts from Wenda Gambling's appearance on television; files from the police investigation into the pea tack onslaught; laws about the tack taxes; pamphlets expressing theories about the origins of pea tacks or any other source they can invent.

4. Ask students to write public service announcements for broadcast over the radio about the war. Let them choose whether to represent the trucks or the pushcarts and create a message that they would like to convey to the public. Remind them to include a tag line at the end, "Paid for by the …"

VI. PROJECTS

1. Make an artistic timeline of the events of the war, including dates and descriptions of each significant event.

2. Create a book jacket for Professor Lyman Cumberly's history book, *Large Object Theory of History*. The book jacket should include a suitable cover for the book, synopsis of the professor's book on the front flap, a biography of the professor on the back flap and appropriate blurbs from experts and reviewers on the back cover.

3. For any of the characters in the novel, fashion a placard that he or she would carry at a demonstration during the war. The slogan on the placard should reflect the carrier's point of view and personality.

4. Design a program to celebrate Cantaloupe Day that elaborates on and adds to the details on pages 211-212 (chapter 34). How could the armistice be celebrated? Who would perform? Who would speak? What activities would be included in the celebration? What food would be served? What souvenirs would be sold? Who would sponsor the event?