



A Pickpocket's Tale

Karen Schwabach

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Molly Abraham is a kinchin mort: a ten-year-old thief trying not to starve on the London streets. But everything changes for Molly when she is sentenced to be transported to the American colonies. She becomes an indentured servant to a kind Jewish family in New York City, and Molly has it good. So why is it that all she wants to do is go back to London?

Karen Schwabach uses richly detailed descriptions and authentic period language to bring history to life. She skillfully explores the subjects of Jewish culture in Colonial America and London street culture in this gritty yet heartwarming debut novel.

A Pickpocket's Tale Details

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Author : Karen Schwabach

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From Reader Review A Pickpocket's Tale for online ebook

HeavyReader says

My friend Tony has been doing a lot of research on indentured servants in America and learning that in many ways, indentured servitude was really slavery for poor whites.

I knew nothing about this book two days ago when I saw it on a shelf in the library's young adult section (The Zone). The cover and title looked interesting, so I borrowed it to read. Imagine my astonishment when I found out it was about a ten year old girl convicted of stealing in London and sentenced to deportation to the North American colonies and indentured servitude (normally seven years, but for children, until the age of majority, which means until age 21, or eleven years). I was really astonished that such a book was written with teens in mind.

Once the main character makes it to the colonies, the plot becomes rather predictable, but it's still a good story.

I would give it three and a half stars if I could.

QNPoohBear says

Molly Abraham, a street rat from London, has made her way in the mean streets of 18th century London as a pickpocket. Now she's been ratted out and hauled before the magistrate. Molly is sentenced to an indenture in America until she comes of age. She discovers that some wealthy Jewish men want to rescue her because of her heritage, which she knows nothing about. She's purchased by a New York merchant, Mr. Bell, because he wants to do a mitzvah, a good deed for someone. Molly soon finds herself struggling to understand her new life and new home. She longs to return to London where she knows who she is and how to survive. Does she still have the street smarts to steal something that would pay her passage back? Does she really want to?

This is a very nice period piece set in 1750. I've read other books about young thieves but the Jewish angle makes it a bit different. I'm familiar with Jews in New York more from the late 19th century than in this time period. I learned a bit about Jewish culture and daily life in old New York. I especially liked the geography of New York: trees and farmland in Manhattan - imagine that! My only real complaint is that the characters sound too modern. Aside from Molly, they all speak modern English. Molly's thieves' cant was a bit tough to understand but there is a glossary in the back of the book.

Molly is a tough character to like. She's been on her own for two years and lived in the worst neighborhood in London. She's seen things Mrs. Bell could never even dream of. Molly's background makes her tough and when she arrives in unfamiliar territory, she tries to apply her street smarts and it makes her seem ungrateful and unappealing. Slowly she grows and the reader will come to like her in the end. I admire her resiliency.

Young readers 10+ would probably enjoy this more than adults but the writing style is very good and not preachy or overly simple. It's a good, quick read for someone who wants to learn a little bit about this time and Jewish life in old New York.

Ettak says

Juvenile historical fiction tale of a young Jewish orphan girl from London who is transported to America as an indentured servant to a Jewish family after being arrested as a pickpocket. I enjoyed learning about life struggles in London and America in the mid-1700s. The Flash-cant language spoken by many of the characters is hard to follow. There is a convenient glossary included and I was constantly having to refer to it.

Summer Meyers says

It was well written for a children's book and the story was interesting. Molly's character was not particularly lovable, but neither was the rest of the characters she interacted with. There were a lot of plot holes and the book ended with no clear conclusion.

It was well researched and age appropriate. A pretty good historical fiction for older children. I had originally picked it up because I thought it would go along with our homeschool history (we are working through colonial time), but I don't know if I'd bother Caroline reading it. It didn't clearly define what Colonial life was like. I think it did a good job with the voyage across, and describing 18th century England so there's that...

Ariel says

This book, appropriate for ages 9 and up, is a really amazing historical look at the settlement of New York in 1730. Molly is a 10-year-old pickpocket in London who, instead of being hung when caught, is sentenced to life in America. On her way there, she is told that she is actually Jewish, which (apparently) will make her experience better, as there are people waiting to take her on the other side of the ocean. The book tells the tale of a young orphan girl, who learns what the word "home" can really mean. Not only does Karen Schwabach cover a very thorough amount of the experience of being Jewish in New York in 1730, but she also opens the cultural windows up to explore all the different parties represented. The slave experience, pirates, French Huguenots, the Dutch, and assorted others figure in to make up a very multi-layered story that not only teaches about this time period, but about people as well. On the whole, this is a well-written and successful piece of historical fiction.

Brigitte Ruel says

A great piece of Judaica fiction, even if it is a bit too moralistic for me (which I guess is supposed to be the point.) I learned a lot about old London, the pickpocket trade and the lingo, Flash-Cant. The Flash-Cant language ends up being the main focus of the book rather than the story, which is a bit odd. I enjoyed it reading this though and would highly recommend it to my Jewish day school students.

Emiliann says

The pros:

- The concept is remarkably creative. A story told in the perspective of an orphaned ten year old pickpocket who's the opposite of the precocious English child stereotype? Sign me the heck up!
- The prose is really nice and cute.
- Molly's a flawed, believable, human MC. Also, she seriously kicks butt.
- I have a weakness for historical fiction, so I mean.
- Being the Sheltered Christian Girl that I am, it was interesting to learn more about Judaism. So that was pretty cool.

The cons:

- The Flash-cant language was really jarring and distracting at first. I'm all for historical accuracy, and thankfully I got used to it and eventually employed understanding context clues so I wasn't constantly flipping back and forth from the glossary to my spot and whatnot. But regardless, it was still pretty annoying at first.

So why, pray tell, you may be saying, do these reasons warrant a three star rating? Well, I blame being spoiled by fantastic adult literature. Children's literature just doesn't dazzle me as much, I guess. I've outgrown it perhaps. Nevertheless, "The Pickpocket's Tale" is a very cute and very good read. I just didn't enjoy it as much as, say, eleven year old me would've.

The final verdict? Three and a half stars.

Mara says

This is a book that at first I was a little dubious about, but ended up really enjoying in the end. While Molly, the heroine, takes forever to trust people, it is a realistic attitude for a character with a background like hers, so her lack of trust was less annoying than it usually would be in most. She does get into a lot of situations that are her own fault because of it, of course, and I wanted to smack her upside the head, but poor Molly doesn't know any better, and she is a naturally-honest person, so it's hard to dislike her for these errors. It's easier to get angry with her new employers, who don't seem to take into considering that she's come from a rough life and may be easily alarmed at things. Mrs. Bell is always upset with things that Molly does, not once wondering if maybe on the streets of London, Molly was taught no differently.

Still, despite a somewhat constant feeling of frustration with a lot of the characters, it is an enjoyable story. Molly may cause a lot of her own problems, but it's through ignorance, and then there are lots of other situations that just happen. And there is no denying that she tries her best to do what's right, she knows how to take care of herself, she's smart, and when she does finally come to trust people, she trusts the right ones.

The Author's writing style is excellent with an authentic flair. I at first thought that I would constantly be looking up the meaning of Flash-cant words - London-street talk - in the index, and that definitely made me pause before starting the story and wonder if this book would be worth it. But the Author does a superb job in giving in-text explanations of certain Flash-cant words, or she uses them in such a context that the Reader can easily guess at their meaning. And all of this is done without breaking the flow of the paragraphs. I only had to refer to the index once or twice, and after that it was easy enough to follow. I actually find myself

really glad that the Author chose to use Flash-cant; it leant a great deal to believability and immersing myself into Molly's world.

My main complaint lies with the story's finis, its end. Throughout most of the book, there is a build-up to a break-in at the synagogue, and then the book ends shortly afterward with a great deal of suddenness. It felt extremely incomplete and left a couple of very important questions unanswered. The Author could have written just one more chapter to answer these questions, and the story's ending would not have felt so abrupt. And as far as I know, there is no sequel.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed the majority of "A Pickpocket's Tale," and it is an ideal pick for those Readers who enjoy authentic-feeling dialogue, smart characters, and rich descriptions of a time period long past.

Magda says

Not as good as many historical fiction novels I've read, but definitely taken in a new direction / from a new perspective.

Susan says

Molly is an orphan in London. Her mother died of Smallpox when she was eight. To survive she picks pockets. She is turned in by a fellow thief and sent before the judge. The sentence could easily be death by hanging. She is saved by a Jewish man, because she is a Jew. Instead of hanging, she is sent to America as an indentured servant for a Jewish family in New York. She is determined to get back to London at all costs and has many adventures trying to do that. Finally she learns how important it is to think of others and not just yourself. I liked this book, although I was a little disappointed in the ending. You do learn a lot about the criminal element in London, including much of their slang. (There is a glossary included.) It will give students a chance to learn about the differences between being an indentured servant and a slave. At one point Molly is told that nobody is totally free. Everyone belongs to someone, even if it is a father or mother. Some of the reviews say that the need of referring to the glossary often is a distraction, but I think most of the words could be inferred from context, which might be a good way to teach an important skill.

Susan Huff, Library Media Specialist

BL says

Even though it is a children's book I learned a lot.

Molly Ringle says

Schwabach's book is a great read for all ages. I would have liked it as an elementary- or middle-school student, and now in my 30s I liked it very much! Schwabach is one of those truly impressive historical

fiction writers who has done her research thoroughly, but slides the information into the story so naturally that it never feels like you're reading *history*, just a good tale that happens to be set in another time. I could smell, feel, hear, and see the filthy streets of 18th century London and the quaintly pastoral roads of 18th century Manhattan. Young Molly's story of redemption, growing from orphaned pickpocket to respectable family member, is certainly as much fun as, and easier for young readers to tackle than, Oliver Twist's--and girls may especially appreciate the way female characters (both naughty and nice) take center stage.

Being a linguistics fan, I think my favorite feature might have been Schwabach's clever use of Flash-cant, the dialect and vocabulary spoken by the London thieves of the era. It added real color and delight, and for me the glossary at the back was almost as much fun to read as the story itself.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

I'd never heard of Flash-cant, the language of London pickpockets, until I read this book. Provides an interesting view of early 18th-century New York City as well.

Elise says

Very short book about a life changing dramatically. I appreciated how real it felt- all of Molly's actions and motives were very believable. She is a very young girl, and I know that young people don't make rational decisions, especially when they have only known one way of life. Molly has only known a world where her very survival depends on her abilities to read other people and when to run. She is used to a life where no one can be trusted. When she is taken in by the colonial family, she learns what life can be like when people care about each other. It takes her a long time to realize that this is better than the life she is used to, which is another reason why I liked it. Molly is constantly trying to think of how to get back to London, just because it is the life she is used to, but she slowly comes to understand that life with this family is much better than anything she knew before.

Kara says

American history classes tend to jump straight from the Salem witch trials to the American Revolution, with *maybe* a viewing of Last of the Mohicans if the teacher has some time fill on the half day before winter break.

A Pickpocket's Tale takes place in 1730, a time period that is fascinating see how America set the foundations for what would *become* America, good and bad. Religious freedom, racism, commerce, expansion, multiculturalism, medicine, theft, banking, slavery, civil rights and lack thereof – it's all being set up before the eyes of the main character, Molly Abrahams, an indentured servant shipped from England to New York City, and forced to hit the ground running to learn how this brave new world works.

The book does a complicated little tap dance to avoid the issue of sex, though it's pretty easy to read between the lines about why some of the female characters have so many "men friends." Loved how the author worked in so many facts about the era – things are explained, but it didn't feel to shoe horned in.

An *excellent* read to introduce the 4th to 6th grade set about Colonial America.
