Through a series of letters to her cousin Tovah, a young Russian Jew describes her family’s journey to America to escape the hardships imposed upon the Jews during the years surrounding World War I. Twelve-year-old Rifka endures the worst—she has ringworm and is not allowed to go to America. Separated from her family, Rifka is sent to Belgium for treatment. Finally allowed to go to America, she almost drowns at sea, only to be detained at Ellis Island. But, in the end Rifka convinces authorities that she is worthy of entering America.

Selected Awards
- National Jewish Book Award
- Christopher Award
- ALA Notable Book

About the Author
Growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, Karen Hesse knew she was good with words. For over thirty years, she pursued her dream of becoming a writer, finally publishing her first book in 1991. Hesse used narrative poetry to tell the story of the 1930s drought in Oklahoma, for which she won the Newbery and Scott O’Dell Awards for Out of the Dust in 1998. For Letters from Rifka, Hesse used a series of letters from a young Jewish girl to her cousin to describe a family’s flight from Russia in 1919. At her home in Vermont, Hesse continues to write for young readers.
Think About What You Know

**Hardships** This book is based on the real-life experiences of the author’s great aunt and her migration from Russia to America. To help students understand the hardships faced by immigrants coming to America, read aloud the historical note on pages 204–206.

- Summarize: During the 1900s, Russian families couldn’t live the way they wanted to, so they left their homes to find a better life in America. The journey to America wasn’t easy. Families had to travel long distances by foot or by train, pass through unfamiliar countries, and cross the ocean.
- Next, have students brainstorm hardships the immigrants might have faced. Prompt with questions: What did the people do with their personal belongings? How did they communicate with others? Did they know where to get food? Where did they stay? What if someone got sick?
- Then have students use Student Journal, page 3 to describe what they think the immigrants were like.

**Preview and Predict**

Have students look at the front cover, read the title, and then read the summary on the back cover. Say:

- **This book is historical fiction.** Although Rifka is a made-up character, her experiences are based on real events. What happened to Rifka? What kind of person do you think she was?

Then point out The Exchange question on the title page: *What is the best way to survive hard times?* Explain that when they finish reading, they’ll share their ideas about this and other questions with a group.

Next, have students complete Student Journal, page 3 to preview the book and make predictions about what Rifka writes about in her letters.
Use a Reading Strategy

Problem and Solution Chart  Preview the graphic organizer on Student Journal, page 4 with students. Explain that as they read Letters from Rifka, they can complete the Problem and Solution Chart to show how Rifka solves her problems and gets to America. Have students add to their Problem and Solution Charts after they finish reading each section.

Use a Reading Strategy

Use a Problem and Solution Chart
As you read Letters from Rifka, use a Problem and Solution Chart to show how Rifka’s family solves their problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rifka and her family had to leave Russia because they were Jewish.</td>
<td>Rifka used her writing and talking skills to get released from Ellis Island and finally joined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish people were being persecuted by the government and non-Jews.</td>
<td>her family in their new life in America.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guards searched for Rifka’s brother. Rifka distracted them.</td>
<td>Rifka's family got better and went to Warsaw. Rifka couldn't leave for America.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The family got sick in Poland. Saul and Rifka were alone.</td>
<td>Rifka got ringworm. She went to Belgium to get cured. Her family went to America without her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rifka's family got better and went to Warsaw. Rifka couldn't leave for America.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rifka got ringworm. She went to Belgium to get cured. Her family went to America without her.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rifka was cured. She began her trip to America. She made friends with a sailor.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A storm wrecked the ship. Pieter saved Rifka, but he died. The ship was towed to Ellis Island.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rifka couldn't enter America because she had no hair. She met Ilya and helped him. Her brother visited.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mama visited. Rifka decided she couldn't go back to Russia.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Read the Book

Form the group that will read *Letters from Rifka*. Plan how the group will read and respond. Some options are:

- **Read with a Group** Group members read an agreed-upon number of pages, complete the corresponding Student Journal page(s), and meet to discuss. When they finish the book, they will meet again for The Exchange. The group can use the planner on Student Journal, page 2 to establish meeting times.

- **Read Independently** Group members read the book on their own and then meet for The Exchange. The group can use the planner on Student Journal, page 2 to establish the meeting time.

- **Guided Reading** Read aloud the summary at the beginning of each letter to give students an overview of the letter. Use the Before You Move On questions to check comprehension as students read. Use Look Ahead to set a focus for reading the next set of pages. At the end of each section, assign the appropriate Student Journal page. Discuss the page before starting the next section. Establish a date for The Exchange and record it on the planner.

Whichever option you choose, use pages 5–13 for an at-a-glance view of Student Journal pages, as well as answers to the Before You Move On questions.

### Plan Your Schedule

My group members are: ________________________________________________________________

We plan to read *Letters from Rifka* and meet on these dates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Date We Will Finish Reading</th>
<th>Date We Will Discuss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. pages 5–27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. pages 28–51</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. pages 52–75</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. pages 76–103</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. pages 104–117</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. pages 118–131</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. pages 132–159</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. pages 160–179</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. pages 180–206</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our Exchange meeting will be on this date: ________________.
**Section 1**

**ANSWERS TO “BEFORE YOU MOVE ON”**

**PAGE 6**

1. **Author’s Purpose** Why did the author call Aunt Lucy?  
   Because she might have more information about her family’s migration to the United States.

2. **Genre** This story is based on fact, but it is fiction. How do you know?  
   The author explains that she changed names and certain details from the true story.

**PAGE 13**

1. **Narrator** Rifka is telling this story. How does she tell the story?  
   Rifka is writing letters to her cousin, Tovah.

2. **Conflict** Rifka’s brother Nathan tried to leave the Russian Army. Why did this cause the family to leave Russia?  
   Jewish deserters were killed in front of the regiment as a warning. The family wanted to save Nathan.

**PAGE 27**

1. **Plot** How did Rifka save her family from the guards? Who else helped? How?  
   She talked to them so they were unable to search the train. Uncle Avrum helped by telling the guards to come help him with a thief in his factory.

2. **Character** Why was Rifka chosen to distract the guards?  
   She looked like a Russian peasant, not Jewish. She spoke Russian without a Yiddish accent, and she was a good talker.
ANSWERS TO “BEFORE YOU MOVE ON”

PAGE 34
1. Conclusions Reread page 32. Why did the doctor examine the people?
The Polish people didn’t want sick people to come into their country and spread disease.
2. Character What shows you that Rifka was angry about how she and her family were treated?
She questioned why Russians would steal their things and why Poles would humiliate them with naked exams at the train station.

PAGE 41
1. Cause and Effect Why did Rifka’s family have to stay in Poland?
Rifka got typhus and gave it to everyone in her family but Saul.
2. Inference Reread page 38. Why did the medical student say the family should not tell anyone about the typhus? They would probably be sent back to Russia if anyone knew Rifka had typhus, because she could contaminate other people.

PAGE 51
1. Character’s Motive Rifka saved her food for Saul. Why?
Reread pages 43–44. She wanted to save her food for him because he worked to support both of them.
2. Flashback Reread pages 49–50. Rifka remembers her life in Berdichev. What was her life like there?
There was no freedom and her family didn’t have much. She weighed more.

Respond to Pages 28–51

Problem and Solution Chart
Add the events that you read about to your Problem and Solution Chart on Journal page 4.

Think It Over
Write answers to these questions.
1. Personal Response Saul and Rifka were alone in Poland. Saul found a job so he and Rifka could survive. Write about a time you had to do something important for yourself or someone else.

2. Setting Why did Rifka write that Russia was not as bad for Tovah’s family as it was for her family? How can one place be different for different people?
Tovah’s family had more money and influence than Rifka’s family, so Russia was not as bad for them. Because they had money, Tovah’s family was not treated as badly.

3. Character’s Point of View Rifka lived with Saul when her parents were in the hospital. How did her feelings about Saul change?
She didn’t like Saul because he teased her. But she began to respect him when he got a job to provide food and shared it equally with her.
ANSWERS TO “BEFORE YOU MOVE ON”

PAGE 62
1. Comparisons  Reread pages 58–59. Compare how Rifka and the Polish girl she met felt about going to America. Rifka was excited and said she would do everything there. The Polish girl didn’t understand why anyone would leave home.

2. Character's Motive  Reread pages 60–61. Why did Rifka ask her mother if she could get off the train? She wanted to find a quiet corner where she could open her Pushkin book. She knew her mother didn’t like Pushkin.

PAGE 70
1. Conflict  Why did the doctor say Rifka could not have a steamship ticket? She had ringworm and would not be allowed to enter the United States.

2. Conclusions  Reread pages 68–70. Why did Rifka think Warsaw was a very bad place? An old man charged her too much money for an orange and called her a thief. Warsaw was big and had cars, which she had not seen before.

PAGE 75
1. Paraphrase  Reread pages 72–75. Tell why Rifka had to go to Belgium and why her mother could not stay with her. Rifka had to go to Belgium to get cured from ringworm. Her mother would not be able to earn money for the family in Europe. If her mother stayed, she would cost the family money.

2. Cause and Effect  Reread page 75. What would happen if Rifka returned to Berdichev? The Russians would kill her. They might punish the rest of her family that lived there.
**Letters from Rifka**

**Section 4**

**ANSWERS TO “BEFORE YOU MOVE ON”**

**PAGE 89**

1. **Character** Rifka loved her new home but said it could never be home without her mama and papa. What did this show about Rifka?
   The love of her family is more important than material things.

2. **Conclusions** Reread pages 85–86. Why was Rifka afraid to play with the children in the park?
   She was afraid they would hate her because she was Jewish and had no hair.

**PAGE 96**

1. **Cause and Effect** Rifka got lost. Reread page 91. What caused Rifka to lose her way?
   She took a different route and then ran from a giant man who smiled at her with gold teeth and scared her.

2. **Conclusions** Reread pages 92–94. Why did Rifka trust the milkman?
   He reminded her of Uncle Zeb and Uncle Zeb would have helped a child. She was told she could trust people in Antwerp because they did not hate Jews like in Russia.

**PAGE 103**

1. **Character** Rifka became friends with the children she used to watch at the park. How else have her feelings about Belgium changed?
   She felt comfortable, and she loved Antwerp. People seemed familiar.

2. **Character’s Motive** Reread pages 102–103. Why did Rifka want to learn to make ice cream?
   She wanted to share her knowledge with her Russian relatives so they could become rich.

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**Respond to Pages 76–103**

**Problem and Solution Chart**
Add events to your Chart on Journal page 4 that show what happened on pages 76–103.

**Think it Over**
Think about what you have read so far and answer these questions.

1. **Personal Response** If you were Rifka, would you explore a big city like Antwerp? Why or why not?

2. **Context Clues** On page 88, Rifka asked her mother if Uncle Avrum wanted Tovah to find a husband. What did Rifka’s mother mean when she said “some girls aren’t meant to marry”?
   She meant that men would probably not be interested in Tovah.

3. **Setting** At first Rifka said she would go back to Berdichev rather than go to Antwerp. But then she liked Antwerp. How were Antwerp and Berdichev similar and different? Do you think Rifka was happy about her decision to go to Antwerp? Why?
   Antwerp and Berdichev both felt like home for Rifka. She knew and liked people in both places.
ANSWERS TO “BEFORE YOU MOVE ON”

PAGE 109
1. Conclusions Reread page 104. Why did the doctor sign Rifka’s papers?
   To say her ringworm was cured and she could go to America.

2. Paraphrase Reread page 107. Use your own words to tell why Pushkin and her letters were important to Rifka.
   Pushkin reminds Rifka of Russia. The memories she writes in her Pushkin book help her remember her own past.

PAGE 117
1. Conclusions Reread page 112. Why did Rifka sometimes pinch herself when Pieter was around?
   She wanted to make sure she was not dreaming. She couldn’t believe how nicely he treated her.

2. Inference Reread page 116. Why do you think Pieter quickly left after he kissed Rifka?
   He was embarrassed after the kiss.

Think It Over
Write answers to these questions.

1. Personal Response Rifka was excited that she was going to America. Write about a time you went someplace new. How did you feel about going there?

2. Character Pieter and others told Rifka she was smart, but Rifka was not sure. Look back in the story. What did Rifka do that shows she is smart?
   She distracted the guards. She wrote well. She talked to everyone. She survived on her own.

3. Character’s Point of View Rifka planned to write poems in America. What inspired her? Do you think this was a good plan? Why or why not?
   Pushkin inspired her. This was a good plan because Rifka was a good writer and had the motivation of wanting to record her memories.
Section 6

ANSWERS TO “BEFORE YOU MOVE ON”

PAGE 127

1. Character  Reread pages 124–125. Rifka heard that Pieter died in the storm. Why did Rifka cry for Pieter and for herself? She cried for Pieter because she learned Pieter went overboard. She cried for herself because she had many difficult things happen to her and had not cried.

2. Summarize  Reread page 126. What did Rifka learn about life? That it is precious and short. People are defenseless and can’t control things.

PAGE 131

1. Context Clues  Reread page 129. The ship arrived at Ellis Island. Rifka’s papa wrote: “at Ellis Island you are neither in nor out of America.” What does this mean? It means that until you are off Ellis Island, you are not yet considered an American and can’t enjoy life as a citizen.

2. Comparisons  How have Rifka’s feelings changed from the last letter? She was miserable and tired and wanted to go back to Berdichev. Now she is excited to see her family and make a new life in America.

3. Paraphrase  Rifka decided that she wanted America to be more than a place to run to. She wanted to make a new life there. She said, “life is as good as a clever girl can make it.” What did she mean? She felt terror, she was scared she would die, there was confusion, she was being attacked either by people or waves, and she felt defenseless. She meant if a person is smart and works hard, they could have a good life. She felt this way about America and knew she would enjoy living there.

Student Journal, page 10

Respond to Pages 118–131

Problem and Solution Chart

Add the events that Rifka wrote about on pages 118–131 to your Chart on Journal page 4.

Think It Over

Think about what you have read so far and answer these questions.

1. Personal Response  On page 127 Rifka said she was tired from her traveling and wished she never left Berdichev. Tell about a time you wanted to give up. Why did you continue?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

2. Metaphor  Rifka compared her fear of the storm to her fear of the pogroms in Russia. How were they similar? She felt terror, she was scared she would die, there was confusion, she was being attacked either by people or waves, and she felt defenseless.

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

3. Paraphrase  Rifka decided that she wanted America to be more than a place to run to. She wanted to make a new life there. She said, “life is as good as a clever girl can make it.” What did she mean? She meant if a person is smart and works hard, they could have a good life. She felt this way about America and knew she would enjoy living there.
ANSWERS TO “BEFORE YOU MOVE ON”

PAGE 138
1. **Conclusions** Reread page 134. What did the chalk mark on Rifka’s shoulder mean? How do you know?
   *It meant she was not yet able to go to America and had to stay with the detainees.*

2. **Cause and Effect** Reread pages 136–137. The American government did not want a woman without hair to come to America. Why?
   *Without hair, a woman wouldn’t find a husband to take care of her so the government would be responsible for her.*

PAGE 147
1. **Character’s Motive** Reread pages 146–147. Rifka met a Russian peasant. At home he was the enemy. Why did she talk to him anyway?
   *She felt sorry for him because he was a scared little boy who was starving himself and it felt good to help him.*

2. **Cause and Effect** Why wasn’t Ilya eating?
   *He wanted to go back to Russia and thought they would send him back if he was sick.*

PAGE 159
1. **Inference** Reread pages 149–150. Saul visited Rifka. Why do you think Saul backed away and looked down at Rifka?
   *He was surprised at how she had changed, that she had no hair and was thinner.*

2. **Conclusions** Reread pages 151–152. Why didn’t Saul talk to the doctor?
   *He couldn’t speak English very well.*
ANSWERS TO “BEFORE YOU MOVE ON”

**PAGE 169**

1. **Simile** On page 160, Rifka’s mother visited. Rifka said her heart would break open like an egg. Why did she make this comparison? 
   *She felt fragile like a thin eggshell, like she could easily break open because she was so full of love for her mother.*

2. **Inference** Reread page 167. Even though we never hear Tovah, how does she help Rifka? 
   *Rifka poses problems to Tovah in her letters and then imagines what Tovah would tell her. Rifka solves her problems this way.*

**PAGE 179**

1. **Character’s Motive** Why was Rifka angry at Ilya for wasting toilet paper? 
   *In Russia it was a crime to waste paper. She was scared they would be killed or punished.*

2. **Inference** Rifka’s head started itching. How did she feel about this? Why? 
   *She was afraid that maybe she had ringworm again. If she had ringworm, she could not enter America.*

**Problem and Solution Chart**

- **Think It Over**
  - Write the answers to these questions.
  1. **Personal Response** Rifka yelled at Ilya for wasting paper. Later, she thought it was funny. Write about a time something bad happened to you that you later thought was funny.

  - **Setting** On page 179 Rifka wrote that she could not go back to Berdichev after living in “this big world.” What did she mean by “this big world”? Why did she say she could not go back? 

  - **Character’s Point of View** Rifka wrote that she was both Jewish and Russian. How did this make her feel different from her family? 

   *Her family members did not think of themselves as Russian. This was because they had many bad experiences with Russian peasants.*
ANSWERS TO “BEFORE YOU MOVE ON”

PAGE 190
1. **Summarize** Reread pages 184–186. Why did Mr. Fargate almost send Ilya back to Russia?
   He thought he was not smart and Ilya would not speak.

2. **Cause and Effect** What happened that made Ilya read?
   Rifka begged Ilya’s uncle to talk to him. His uncle said he wanted him and wanted to give him a better life. His uncle came over and asked him to read. Ilya began to read.

PAGE 203
1. **Plot** Reread pages 192–193. What lesson did Rifka learn?
   to depend on being clever, not her looks

2. **Character** How did Rifka use the lesson to convince Mr. Fargate that she didn’t need hair?
   She told him all the ways she was smart, that she would marry for love, and that she had talent in writing. She proved that talent by reading one of her poems.

PAGE 206
1. **Author’s Purpose** Why did the author include a historical note?
   to show readers that the events in the story were based on real life; to make readers aware of history

2. **Summarize** Why was life so difficult for Jewish people in the years around World War I?
   People were angry at them and many of them were killed. They were not free and could not own property.
Allow time for groups to meet for The Exchange. If you plan to participate, use these tips for guiding students in discussing the big question:

**What is the best way to survive hard times?**

- **How would Rifka answer this question? Think of the many difficult events that happened on her trip to America.**
  Rifka would say that writing to Tovah gave her strength to survive. She would also talk about how the love she had for her family and her dreams of a better life helped her overcome the many problems she had.

- **There are many times Rifka feels like quitting her journey to America. Think of as many as you can. Then tell about a time you felt like quitting something. How did you keep going?**
  Rifka wants to quit her journey when her family leaves her in Europe. She thinks of Berdichev before she gets on the boat to America. She cries when Pieter dies. She is also frustrated when she has to wait at Ellis Island.

- **What if Rifka did not help Ilya? What do you think would happen to him? How important do you think it is to help others?**
  Ilya would almost certainly die of hunger or be sent back to Russia if Rifka didn’t help him.

**Extend the Reading**

### Write a Letter to Rifka

Have students imagine that Tovah has received Rifka’s letter from America and the book of Pushkin filled with her notes about the journey. Invite them to write back to Rifka as if they were Tovah, telling how she feels about Rifka’s journey and asking questions about America.

### Research Ellis Island

Have small groups find out more about Ellis Island from books, encyclopedias, or online. Have them choose downloaded photos or drawings to use for an exhibit, add captions, and display the exhibit in the classroom.

### Describe the Journey

Students can draw or trace Rifka’s journey on a map. Then they can present it to the class, tracing the route, giving the distances from place to place, and using one or two summary statements to tell what happened during each leg of the journey.