

ADEN POLYDOROS

THE CITY BEAUTIFUL

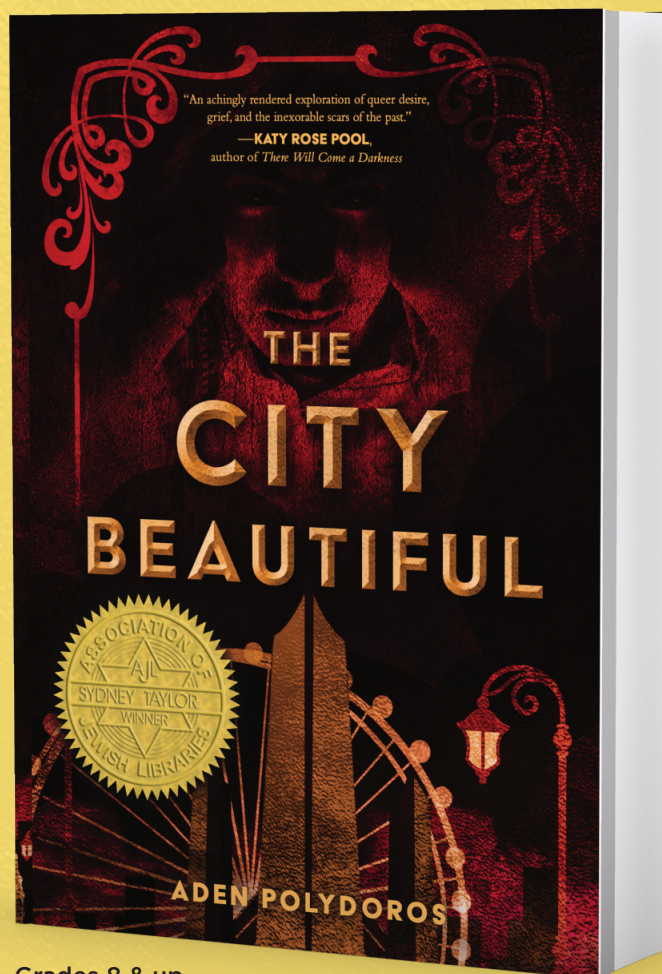
DISCUSSION GUIDE

Death lurks around every corner in this unforgettable Jewish historical fantasy about a city, a boy, and the shadows of the past that bind them both together.

Chicago, 1893. For Alter Rosen, this is the land of opportunity, and he dreams of the day he'll have enough money to bring his mother and sisters to America, freeing them from the oppression they face in his native Romania.

But when Alter's best friend, Yakov, becomes the latest victim in a long line of murdered Jewish boys, his dream begins to slip away. While the rest of the city is busy celebrating the World's Fair, Alter is now living a nightmare: possessed by Yakov's dybbuk, he is plunged into a world of corruption and deceit, and thrown back into the arms of a dangerous boy from his past. A boy who means more to Alter than anyone knows.

Now, with only days to spare until the dybbuk takes over Alter's body completely, the two boys must race to track down the killer—before the killer claims them next.



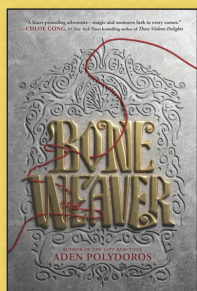
Grades 8 & up
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Winner of the 2022 Sydney Taylor Book Award for Young Adult Fiction

2022 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel finalist • 2021 National Jewish Book Award finalist

A Lambda Literary Award finalist • 2021 Bram Stoker Award Preliminary Ballot for Young Adult Novels

A New York Public Library Best Book for Teens 2021



ALSO BY
ADEN POLYDOROS

Discussion Questions available on page 4

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

The City Beautiful consists of numerous genre elements. It's a thriller, a historical novel, and it contains supernatural elements. Before reading the novel, take some time with a partner or in a group to do some research on Jewish folklore, particularly on the mystical figure of the dybbuk. What is a dybbuk? What are its effects on other people? Why is it seen as an important figure within Jewish folklore? Once you've completed your research, write down your findings and keep them in mind as you read the novel. Take notes as you read and check in with your friend or group to see how your findings show up within the book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *The City Beautiful* is a historical novel that the author put a lot of thought and research into. What did you learn about Jewish history through the novel? How did Alter's story affect your previous knowledge of the time period in which the book takes place?
- The author includes the use of numerous languages in the book. What do these languages tell you about the experiences of immigrants from Eastern Europe at the time? How does language impact Alter and other characters as they interact with one another? What about as they confront those in positions of power throughout the novel?
- Frankie says, "Shame is a word people use to try to control you" (p. 75). How does shame affect Alter's actions and self-perception as he works to solve the mystery of the missing boys? What does Alter do to move past the feeling of shame? Is he successful?
- When Frankie says "[s]ins are measured in the pain you cause others" (p. 203), what do you think he means? How does the concept of "sin" affect characters throughout the novel?
- At many points in history, people from different cultural backgrounds have had to change their names in order to fit in wherever they end up geographically. Alter originally changes his name to Alex, but later says, "I don't go by Alex anymore" (p. 65). How do names and name changes show up and play out during the course of the novel?
- Back in the 19th century, there weren't really words to describe sexuality like there are today. How does this affect the way Alter sees himself in relation to his attraction to other boys? How does his religion and those around him impact his self-discovery?
- Numerous characters in *The City Beautiful* are immigrants to America, working hard to assimilate into Chicago's culture. Frankie points out to Alter, "[y]ou realize what this city does to kids on the street, Alter? It devours them" (p. 151). How does this statement manifest through the various characters that Alter confronts and interacts with? What about when it comes to who is targeted by the killer?
- Antisemitism is central to Alter's experiences, both as a worker and as an immigrant: "They can grit their teeth and tolerate us, but they'll never welcome us into their white cities, because ambition becomes something ugly when it has a Jewish face" (p. 235). How does this affect Alter and his friends and family? What is the effect on Jewish people at large throughout the novel?
- Whether it's in relation to race, culture, gender, or sexuality, many characters in the novel are forced to hide their identities and are punished when they are open with those same identities. How do "hiding" and "coming out" work throughout the narrative? How does being openly gay and/or Jewish affect the ways that Alter, Frankie, and others in the novel are treated?
- Grief is a major theme in the narrative, and it shapes how Alter interacts with friends and family. It is also one of the main reasons why Alter is so vulnerable and affected by Yakov's death. Look back through the novel; how does grief impact the narrative in general, and Alter's interactions with Frankie and Raizel specifically?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- At the Whitechapel Club, Alter and Frankie are tasked with telling a story to the other members in order to be initiated. Work with a partner or a group to construct a story that you would tell to become a member of the Club. You can do some research to make your story more historically accurate, or you can make it up entirely.
- The title of the novel also refers to an architectural and social movement in the late 19th century that greatly affected Chicago, among a few other larger cities in the US at the time. Do some further research on this movement and map out how the philosophy of the movement informs the world of the novel. Find evidence of the impacts of this movement within the book and compare your findings with others.
- With a partner or small group, choose a historical event highlighted within *The City Beautiful*, then write down what you know about that event (don't do any external research yet). Next, discuss what you learned about that event from reading the novel. Do some further research to round out your knowledge and then compare what you learned to what is included in the book. Did the author change any details? If so, why?
- Raizel works at a radical anti-capitalist newspaper called the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. This newspaper was real, and it was a very unpopular newspaper outside of the working class because of its support of unions and strikes, and its condemnation of wealthy businessmen. Put yourself in the position of Raizel, or another writer at a radical newspaper in the 1890s. Write a short article about one of the main events in the novel from that perspective. Make sure to come up with a catchy title, too.

INTERNET RESOURCES

- [Jewish Virtual Library: Dibbuk \(Dybbuk\)](#)
- [Britannica: The City Beautiful Movement](#)
- [Aden Polydoros Author Website](#)
- [We Need Diverse Books: Q&A with Aden Polydoros, The City Beautiful](#)
- [Geeks Out: Interview with Author Aden Polydoros](#)
- [Jewish Book Council: "Pasts That Are as Diverse as the Present": A Conversation between Sacha Lamb and Aden Polydoros](#)

PRAISE

- ★ "Polydoros seamlessly blends a murder mystery with Jewish folklore in this haunting historical fantasy.... Readers looking for finely wrought historical fiction with fully realized characters and a thrilling pursuit of justice are sure to be satisfied by Alter's story." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review
- ★ "A gorgeous, disturbing, visceral and mystical experience.... His unflinching and well-rounded depiction of Jewish American and immigrant history makes *The City Beautiful* a superb addition to the ranks of YA historical fiction." —*Bookpage*, starred review
- ★ "A wild ride of a queer gothic fantasy that's a must-have for YA fantasy collections." —*School Library Journal*, starred review
- ★ "*The City Beautiful* is a triumph, showcasing queer love, illuminating historical events, and guiding readers to an enthralling ending that will leave them satiated yet desirous to return to the world in which they have become immersed." —*Booklist*, starred review

ALSO BY
ADEN POLYDOROS

BONE WEAVER

ABOUT THE BOOK

This haunting fantasy follows Toma, adopted daughter of the benevolent undead, as she makes her way across a civil war-torn continent to save her younger sister and discovers she might possess magical powers herself.

The Kosa empire roils in tension, on the verge of being torn apart by a proletarian revolution between magic-endowed elites and the superstitious lower class, but seventeen-year-old Toma lives blissfully disconnected from the conflict in the empire with her adoptive family of benevolent undead.

When she meets Vanya, a charming commoner branded as a witch by his own neighbors, and the dethroned Tsar Mikhail himself, the unlikely trio bonds over trying to restore Mikhail's magic and protect the empire from the revolutionary leader, Koschei, whose forces have stolen the castle. Vanya has his magic, and Mikhail has his title, but if Toma can't dig deep and find her power in time, all of their lives will be at Koschei's mercy.



Grades 8 & up

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- “There were holes in my memory, dark spaces where time had gnawed away at my past” (p. 43). These absences in Toma’s mind are a thread throughout the novel. How else does the theme of absence show up throughout the book? What other kinds of gaps in knowledge or ability are characters dealing with? How does this absence affect each character’s overall journey in the book? Find evidence from the text to support your answers.
- Much of the folklore that the author weaves into the novel comes from researching the Eastern European countries where his ancestors came from and the folklore and folk traditions from that part of the world. Which is your favorite piece of Slavic folklore from the novel? Why did this piece of folklore stand out to you? Do you read or watch other stories that incorporate similar folklore? Why do you think the author chose to use this folklore in the narrative?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS *CONTINUED*

- The subject of imperialism comes up repeatedly throughout the novel. What do you know about the history of Russian imperialism? How does this imperialism affect each of the main characters over the course of the novel? How does each character work to push back against the imperialist system threatening to crush them? Find quotes from the book to support your answers.
- Mikhail, Vanya, and Toma are all struggling to be themselves in a world that doesn't understand them. For each character, discuss why others in the book fear them. What makes them dangerous to those in power within the book? How does the inclusion of magic complicate the ways that those in power try to oppress them? How do the main characters fight back?
- Various religious undertones and belief systems are threaded throughout the world of *Bone Weaver*. How do these belief systems and religious elements affect each of the main characters? How does religion contribute to the oppression of various groups within the world of the novel? How do the main characters push back against these systems? Look for evidence and share your findings with others.

PRAISE

★ “Superb... Polydoros is a master of world building and conjuring suspense in a page-turning plot. His characters are highly empathetic and memorable, as is this emotionally charged story.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

“Polydoros crafts a magical world that readers will revel in exploring... Fans of Justina Ireland’s *Dread Nation* and the *Shadow & Bone* series will love this dark fantasy with a touch of horror.”

—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*

“A dark and thrilling tale.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Aden Polydoros grew up in Illinois and Arizona, and has a bachelor’s degree in English from Northern Arizona University. When he isn’t writing, he enjoys going to antique fairs and flea markets. He can be found on Twitter at @AdenPolydoros.

MORE FROM ADEN POLYDOROS



Middle Grade



Young Adult

This guide was prepared by Robert Bittner,
YA Literature Specialist, Educator, and Consultant.



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