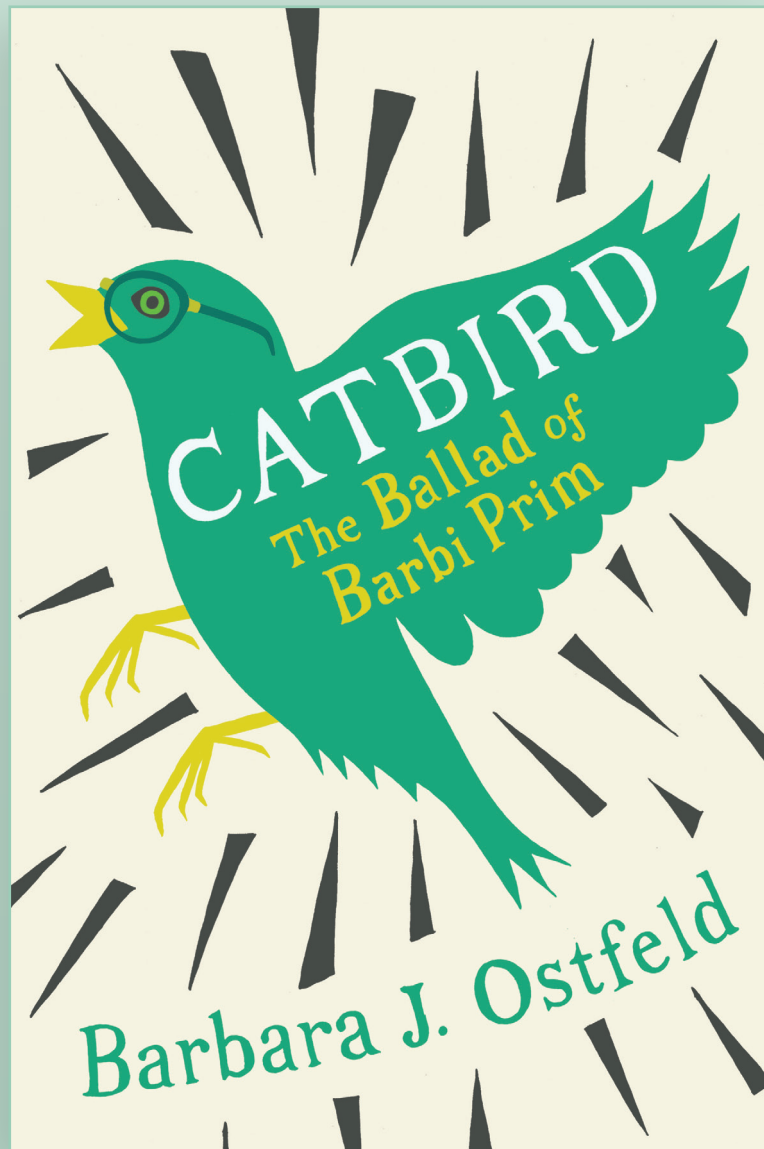


A Reading Guide for High School Groups

# *CATBIRD* *The Ballad of Barbi Prim*



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# CATBIRD *The Ballad of Barbi Prim*

## Questions

## Thoughts

### Sandra Kramov's Bat Mitzvah, and Dr. King

1. How old were you when you started to think about right and wrong on a national level? A global level? What was the cause?
2. What connections do you see between your thoughts about social justice and your religious identity?

### Palms, Not Napalm

3. Have you ever been involved in a protest or a political event? What was the issue and how were you involved? What do you think about your experience?
4. If you've ever experienced crowd or mob psychology during a sports event, concert, or rally, how did it feel to you? How did you react? Do you think your reaction next time be the same or different?

### Contact Lenses, Torah Corps, and Chin Hair

5. Have you ever been suddenly struck by an overwhelming worry about some aspect of your appearance or physical ability? What was the setting? What did you do about it?

### Consider all three vignettes together.

6. In what ways do you relate to the main character? In what ways is your life different from hers?
7. What are your takeaways from these three excerpts? About yourself? About other people's experiences—whether they're your age now, or were your age in the past? About your religious identity?

The three vignettes are included  
on the following pages.



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## *Sandra Kramov's Bat Mitzvah, and Dr. King*

I go to one friend's Bat Mitzvah. Sandra Kramov. She's my age but a year behind me in school, like everyone else who's actually my age. Sandra has a funny speaking voice, high and in her nose with a kind of sharp edge to it. I like her well enough, but she isn't a close friend—although I'm glad that she invited me.

Sandra isn't on the bima for long and she doesn't sing, but she looks very grown up, and her parents are smiling. A lot. Maybe too much. They seem nervous. Sandra has her hair done. It makes her face look small.

As soon as the party starts, she takes off her shoes. That makes Mrs. Kramov mad, but by then Sandra doesn't care. I see her nylons running. That's why I'm not allowed to wear them. You wear them once, and they are ruined. Mom doesn't want to hear about all the other girls whose mothers let them wear nylons.

I am alone at a long kids' table, so I open and close the latch on my purse a few times. Snap, snap. I start to think. Would I have liked a Bat Mitzvah? I think yes because I could have maybe sung. I'm pretty sure that Cantor Rosen didn't let Sandra sing because of that catch in her voice. But I didn't want to learn Hebrew because Dad thinks it's antiquated. He says learning Hebrew is archaic, and that one time his father had taken him to a synagogue where there was mumbling and shuffling around, which does sound stupid. Dad said that there was no cantor and no choir and no organ—also that there were no kids there, only old men. *Archaic* is like old men with untrimmed fingernails in a yellow room. I might have gotten a new dress and shoes, though. Maybe a hairstyle.

People have started dancing, and I want to go home.

Rabbi Mervis talked about Sandra accepting the commandments and being newly responsible. Sandra nodded, but I could tell that she wasn't paying attention because she was looking at her new ring. She even twisted it so the amethyst faced her palm. Rabbi Mervis said, "Sandra?" and she looked at him and nodded fast and swallowed. I think she started to listen again.

Now she's dancing, with her shoes back on. I have forty-five minutes until Mom comes to pick me up. I look in my purse. There's a dime in case I need to make an emergency call, and a handkerchief. I wish I had lipstick—pink Yardley lipstick. My first choice would be London Luv Pink. It comes in a tube with baby blue and pink stripes going all around it. I'm too young to wear lipstick, Mom says.

*bat mitzvah: daughter of the commandment—originally, the recognition that an adolescent girl or boy (bar mitzvah) had reached the age when she/he became subject to the laws of the Torah as an adult; today, also the term for the ceremony that commemorates this status*



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I think I am responsible—more than Sandra. People trust me to babysit. I go back and forth to the Loop by myself. I get good grades. I have opinions about Civil Rights. I don't get in trouble. Sandra's parents take away some of the magazines she buys, and some books too. I'm allowed to read any books I want. I read *Lolita*, which I wish I hadn't because it comes into my mind sometimes. My mind isn't always responsible, which is why I like to read and why I wish I had a book now while I'm waiting. I feel like I'm just watching other kids a lot of the time. Watching is usually not good.

Watching my Sunday school friends is making me feel like a little kid. They look more grown up, and they know how to be at parties. Watching grown-ups isn't good either, because they can have too much alcohol and get loud or start to mispronounce words or say things I shouldn't hear. Listening can be as bad as watching. That's why reading is good.

When I'm in temple, I can watch almost anything and not worry about it being okay. It's quiet, and people say "shhh" to their kids or hold hands or look at other people's clothes. And I always have a book, with phrases like "Justice shall flow like waters" and "The earth is the Lord's" and "He that hath clean hands." I love all of these words, but I get a little twitchy when words like *brothers* and *mankind* and all the *he's* start to add up. I understand that God is a male, but everyone isn't a male. What about everyone else? What about me?

Rabbi Mervis talks about Dr. King and how he nailed a list of demands on the door of City Hall downtown and how that was a religious act. He says that religion demands caring for the poor and not just coming to temple. He usually talks about one of the prophets in his sermons. Dad really likes that. We talk about it in the car going home—if Dad is in the mood. If he's not, we're all quiet.

Dad's going to take us to hear Dr. King at Elmhurst College. I can't believe Dr. King is coming to Elmhurst. His talk is part of his plan to integrate the suburbs.

There aren't any Negroes in Elmhurst. Once when Sarah was little, maybe three, we were in the car driving downtown, and she saw a little black girl playing in a yard, and she said, "Look, a baby maid!" Mom was very upset and had to do a lot of calm explaining. That story proves Dr. King's point about suburbs being all white.

If I had a Bat Mitzvah, in my speech I would talk about Dr. King and integration and going to march with him in the South when I'm in college. AND, I would wear London Luv Pink lipstick plus nylons and a bra.



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## *Palms, Not Napalm*

The phone rings first thing in the morning. My friend John Emerson tells me to report to the Episcopal church on Church Street at noon. There will be an action related to Palm Sunday. I have no idea what Palm Sunday is and call Joanne Pedersen. She laughs and asks her mother. According to Mrs. Pedersen, it marks Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey. The palms come into it because they were strewn in his path as he entered. I know better than to ask Joanne to come with me. Protesting is not a subject I discuss with her. Only with John, who has red hair and blue eyes, whose mother goes to League of Women Voters meetings with my mother.

I don't know why I am going to this Episcopal church in the cold with some snow still left on the ground, but if John says go, I go, and there will be adventure. John and some guy pick me up in this guy's old and smelly car. John and I are too young to drive. When we stop at a stop sign, John screams, "Wait!" He leaps out of the car, as does the other guy, they fly toward each other in a parody of a loping run to the front of the car, kiss each other with tongues, and mock-run back to their seats. I am shocked but pretend not to care. I start wondering what it means that they kissed or if it only means that they are exuberant with some kind of Palm Sunday protest excitement. Maybe they're just stoned. That's it, probably.

We get to the church, where I see John's older friends, who live, I think, at People's House. I don't really know what People's House is all about, but I love the communistic name. It's where the activists gather and smoke marijuana and lie around talking at all hours. I've been there a few times, but not for long.

So on Palm Sunday I look around at the boys and see that their hair is longish. Some are ragged looking, but most of them just look like they might be from England. Their jackets look very worn, like they've been worn by previous generations. I see old-looking clothes that aren't in shop windows. There seem to be more than the usual number of people wearing glasses with heavy black frames.

I'm not dressed right. Why am I never dressed right? I'm wearing a pastel plaid A-line skirt with pantyhose. Most of the older women aren't even wearing pantyhose. The other girls are in earth-tone corduroy pants. A few have embroidered flowers on the legs of their pants. I set my hair last night so it would look good for today, but it's too fixed up or something. My hair never just hangs around



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my face like other girls' hair. It moves, but it doesn't sway or cascade. Nothing about me is just natural.

But I know my way around a protest all right. I pick up my sign, reading it. "Palms, Not Napalm." I think I get it. I've read about the Napalm Ladies. People should pray and stop supporting this war. How can we be burning little Asian kids with jellied poison?

I seize my palm branch but quickly feel a queasy pang of something. A Jew with a palm branch? I give the palm branch to a bearded guy in a tweedy-looking worker cap. Both the cap and the beard have seen better days. He winks at me, and I look away. *Don't wink, Older Creepy Guy*, I think. *This is serious.*

There are a lot of us in the street, and the police come, mainly to watch. They look stupid. People come out of the church and are sort of confused. They squint at us and gawk. We sing, but I don't know the songs until I've heard them for a bit. If Jesus comes into it, I don't sing. Some photos are taken, presumably by the *Elmhurst Press* photographers.

And then it's over and we go home. I'm sad. I take the cat up to my room along with some chocolate-covered almonds.

Monday after school Mom tells me that Uncle Marvin is furious with me. Apparently my picture was in the *Elmhurst Press* in connection with the Palms, Not Napalm protest. Marvin is incensed that my parents allow me to participate in a radical, hippie left-wing protest right in his backyard. Mom smiles. I don't grant my mother even the smallest acknowledgment. Instead I head upstairs for more chocolate almonds and Isaac Bashevis Singer. I reach for the cat, but she scoots away.

## *Contact Lenses, Torah Corps, and Chin Hair*

We are returning to our bunk from chofesh (free time), practicing our new Hebrew words and deciding which white shirts we'll wear on Shabbat. These kids seem to know more words than I do. Words like *parasha* (weekly Torah reading) and *D'varim* (Deuteronomy or, literally, *words*). We've been hearing about footsteps in the sand from one of the rabbis here. It's so neat to learn this stuff. So when a guy is troubled and sees only his own footprints, he wonders where are God's, particularly in his time of need. After all, God has promised to be by our side, right? God comes to him in a dream to say that in such times the guy sees only one set of prints because God is CARRYING HIM IN HIS ARMS. I just love this!



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Deb says, “Hey, you have one black hair right here in the middle of your chin!”

Everything stops. The words fly away and the wind blows in, filling up any outlines of feet in sand. I think I feel faint.

What could be worse than dark facial hair? I already spend tons of time worrying about managing the frizzing hair on my head, keeping my makeup fresh, hiding my sweat, my fatness (which could make a comeback any minute), my clothes, my huge nose.

If I have chin hair, I might as well lie down and die.

And I feel so good here, so at home and excited about what we’re doing. This is Torah Corps: Torah study and Jewish folk singing in a camp setting with people who look something like me. How is it that I’ve never seen the chin hair?

I got contact lenses last year—finally, at fourteen. I know my vision’s okay with regular glasses, but I’ve heard my parents say things from time to time about how even unattractive women who know how to take care of themselves can cut a decent figure. So the contacts had to be a pity present. Contact lenses are a big deal. Getting good at putting them in and taking them out took lots of practice, but I’ve got it down now. Losing one is disastrous—requiring a long wait for a replacement—not to mention expensive. They get oily and cloud your vision. Worse, people can tell if your lenses are smudgy. Also you blink a lot. But now that green lenses have entered my life, one thing is undeniable. I have green eyes. I am a girl with green eyes, not just greenish eyes. I am now pale with green eyes. If only I could imagine for a moment that the description ended there. My mind includes *oversized nose, bordering on overweight, clumsy, and stiff*.

So I wear lots of eye makeup now. Oh, and my ankles are narrow. Pale with green eyes and narrow ankles.

AND I’ve found clean-smelling perfume. Nothing cloying or fruity. I hate musk and sandalwood. I like green smells as well as green eyes. Grass, citrus, bergamot (whatever the fuck that is).

*Verdant*. I love that word.

So even with contact lenses, now I need a magnifying mirror? Like the ones in those mail order catalogs from Vermont?

I’m doing everything I can, but this chin hair escaped my notice. I’m not even fat this year. Now I have to add another thing to my list of grooming tasks. How many other people have seen that hair? Have boys seen it? Do people joke about it? Maybe Deb was the first to see



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it, the only one to see it. Maybe I got away with it. It's only one chin hair. Tweezers. Who might have tweezers? I know where Mom keeps hers at home.

Mom!

What is Mom going to say when I tell her that I want to observe kashrut from now on?

*kashrut: cleanliness—the laws governing keeping a kosher kitchen*

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*Your Reactions and Thoughts*

