

# EDUCATOR/DISCUSSION GUIDE

*ETHEL'S SONG: Ethel Rosenberg's Life in Poems*

Written by Barbara Krasner

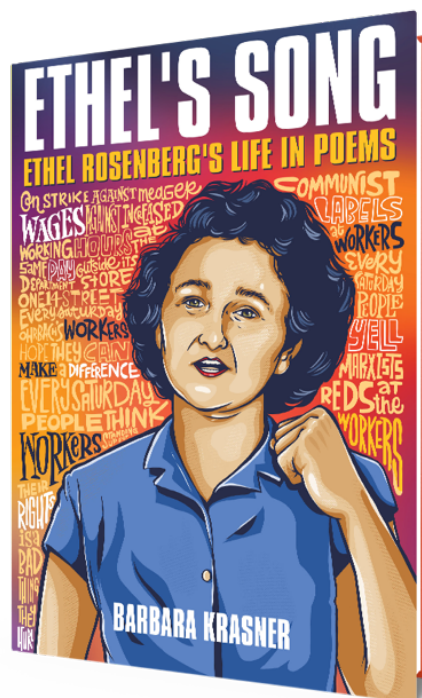
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## ABOUT THE BOOK

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Born in New York City in 1915, Ethel Greenglass dreamed of a life far away from the tenements of the Lower East Side. She imagined becoming famous for her acting or singing ability, but she instead became infamous for her suspected role in a 1950s spy scandal. Ethel and her husband, Julius Rosenberg, were arrested and accused of selling state secrets to the Soviet Union. The trial gripped the nation, and Ethel and Julius were convicted, sentenced, and put to death.

In this moving collection of poems, author Barbara Krasner traces Ethel's life from the dreams of her youth and her struggles with her family to her happy marriage to Julius and, eleven years later, their trials and convictions. In this revealing look at a troubling time in U.S. history, Krasner brings to light Ethel's intelligence and ambition, her passion for justice and workers' rights, and her love for her husband and children.

## PRAISE FOR *ETHEL'S SONG*:

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★ "Told in verse, this is a story of persistence and resilience. Rosenberg stood up for what she believed in, called out injustices, and was committed to the fight to end poverty and bring rights to the worker. Excellently written and expertly researched, Krasner's work tells an important story not to be forgotten by time. A painful tale of familial betrayal, and yet another failure of the U.S. justice system... [J]aw-dropping true story for any YA reader interested in U.S. political history." —*School Library Journal*, starred review

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"A fresh, creative approach to this fascinating and controversial story." —Steve Sheinkin, award-winning author of *Fallout: Spies, Superbombs, and the Ultimate Cold War Showdown*

"Ethel Greenglass' story has often been told with her husband, Julius Rosenberg, at the forefront; now it's her turn. . . . Even if readers are already aware of how the story ends, this work, which utilizes a variety of forms of poetry and is enhanced with historic photos, will read like a thriller complete with passion, politics, and family betrayal. . . . The subject's voice, strength, intelligence, and heart ring out on every page." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"Krasner's daring historical novel is a collection of fictionalized first-person poems that . . . build tension through Rosenberg's consistently proud, defiant voice, and her confidence that she and Julius did nothing wrong. . . . Family photos, interspersed throughout, lend poignancy; an epilogue and timeline provide context and additional historical background." —*Publishers Weekly*

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH

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The author depicts Ethel's difficult home life and the family's poverty. What do her parents do to earn a living? What lines from the poems let you know the family is just scraping by? Describe Ethel's relationship with her parents and her siblings.

What are Ethel's talents? How do her talents inform her ambitions?

At Passover, Ethel is not allowed to ask the Four Questions. Why not? What are the Four Questions? What are Ethel's questions? How does Ethel answer in the poem "The Four Questions Revisited"? And again in "The Four Questions Two Months after Passover"?

Ethel's dreams of college are dashed by her family's need for money during the Great Depression. She takes a secretarial course instead. What subjects does she become certified in? Where does she find work?

Inspired by what she sees on the job and by what she reads in the paper, Ethel champions the rights of workers and joins a union. She and other union members go on strike. After they attend a strikers' meeting, what happens? Ten days later, the strike ends. What happens to Ethel and the other strike committee members?

Ethel gets a new job for more money and fewer hours. What does she plan to do with the extra money?

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The Communist Party's Workers Alliance stages sit-ins "to demand more relief for the unemployed." What does Ethel do to support the protesters?

In the poem, "The Seamen's Benefit," Ethel meets Julius Rosenberg. What is their first meeting like? How does Ethel describe Julius in the next poem, "Ciribiribin"?

Who does Ethel call "Three Little Pigs" and why?

Julius and Ethel are married in June of 1939, but three months later Europe is at war. How does this affect their work with the Communist Party?

How does Ethel respond when Hitler invades the Soviet Union? Who does Ethel worry about when President Roosevelt declares war on Japan?

In "The Heroes' Hour," Julius and Ethel attend a rally in Central Park. Who is at the rally? What decision does Julius make at the rally?

In March 1943, Ethel gives birth to Michael. How does Ethel feel about her son? In the poem, "Charisma," how does Ethel indicate her priorities?

In April 1946, Ethel suggests to Julius that he be his own boss. Who does Julius start a business with?

In May 1947, Ethel gives birth to a second son, Robert. How have Ethel and Julius's lives changed since the end of WWII? What is their financial situation like?

In the poem, "The Papers Say," Ethel recounts all the reports swirling in the newspapers. What report strikes close to home? Who does Ethel suspect is involved with giving secrets to the Soviets?

What are "Reds"? In "McCarthy Fans the Flames of the 'Red Scare,'" the author suggests that McCarthy's wife no longer wears what color lipstick? And what crayons does she suggest McCarthy remove from his daughter's box?

Who are the "Visitors" who come to Ethel and Julius's apartment in June of 1950? What do they want with Julius? What happens a month later?

In the poem, "A Typical Spy," how is Julius atypical?

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Ethel's brother, David (Dovey), is married to Ruthie. After Julius's arrest, Ruthie acts strangely around Ethel. Why?

After Ethel is arrested and charged, her lawyer fails to convince the judge to release her. Who does she call? How does she communicate with Julius? How often are they allowed to communicate?

What does Ethel think about in jail? How does she pass the time?

In "Mama Visits," how has Ethel's relationship with her mother changed? How is Ethel's relationship with her own sons similar or different to her relationship with her mother?

Julius and Ethel's trial begins on March 6, 1951. Why does Ethel wear a white blouse? How does the author describe the courtroom?

How do Dovey and Ruthie betray Ethel?

What is the outcome of the trial? In "Sentencing," the author writes: "the judge speaks at the same time as the bells of a nearby church peal/as if what he's about to render comes from divine providence." Why does the verdict seem preordained? What is their sentence?

How do Ethel and Julius fight the verdict? Describe Ethel's feelings about being separated from her children. When Michael and Robby visit Ethel at the prison, what is their visit like? What does Ethel give Robby? What questions do the boys ask?

What is prison like for Ethel? What does she do to get through the "sleepless nights" and "exhausting days"?

What do Ethel and Julius hope the new president, Dwight Eisenhower, will do for them?

For months, "the croupier of the courts spins the roulette wheel," and Ethel hopes she and Julius will be set free. What happens on June 19, 1953? What thoughts does Ethel share with her sons on that fateful day?

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### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

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Ethel decides to increase her vocabulary with “The Dictionary Plan.” One word of the day is “exigency.” Later, her English teacher commends her vocabulary, calling it “laudable.” What do those words mean? What do you think Ethel’s desire to educate herself indicates about Ethel?

Hope chests. Deadbeats. Underbelly. Smoke and mirrors. Gallows humor. These are just some of the expressions the author uses. What do these words mean?

What is communism? Why is communism appealing to Ethel and many others in the early 1930s?

What is fascism? In the poem, “A New Word for My Dictionary,” Ethel worries about two dictators. Who are they?

What are G-men? Who was head of the FBI in the 1930s? In “J. Edgar Hoover Seeks and Promises to Find,” what does the poem reveal about Hoover?

How does Ethel’s relationship with her brother, Dovey, change over the course of the book? What is Julius’s relationship with his brother-in-law like?

In 1945, the time of cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union ends. What is happening in Korea at this time? How is communism now perceived in the United States? Read “The Un-Americans.” How does this poem illustrate the change?

In “Julie Gets Uneasy,” Julius says, “we’ve got nothing to worry about” but then he puts the dishes in the wrong cabinet.” Do you think Julius’s words are contradicted by his actions? What do you think Julius is worried about?

In “We’re Being Watched,” Ethel wonders “how could helping the Soviet Union defeat Hitler make us the bad guys?” In “Some Words about the Charges,” the author notes, “[w]hat was right during the war is now wrong.” What has changed in America in the five years since WWII ended? Later in “Reversal Denied,” the author quotes the *Daily Worker* (a newspaper that espoused communist views): “The fight to save the Rosenbergs is the fight to keep America free from Buchenwalds and Dachaus.” What are “Buchenwalds and Dachaus”? Why does the *Daily Worker* equate the effort to exonerate the Rosenbergs with keeping America free of concentration camps?

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In the “Aftermath,” Julius has been arrested and all Ethel “can think of is 64 Sheriff Street.” Why do you think she is remembering her childhood home at that moment?

Read the poem “Each Night I Ache.” What do you notice about the structure of the poem?

Manny Bloch, Ethel and Julius’s lawyer, “moves for a mistrial based on the flagrant prejudices, based on the flimsy evidence the prosecution presented.” But the motion is denied. Do you think Ethel received a fair trial?

Throughout the book, the author shares Ethel’s love for singing. After Ethel and Julius are sentenced and put in holding cells, Julius tells Ethel not to worry. What does Ethel do? Find out more about the opera, *Madame Butterfly*. Why does Ethel think of this opera after their sentencing? Later, in “Reversal Expected,” Ethel feels as though “a harmonica-rich blues song thrums inside me.” How does the author use Ethel’s love of music to reveal Ethel’s thoughts and feelings?

The poem, “Arrival,” repeats “Sing Sing” twice in every stanza. Why do you think the author does this? How does the poem sound when read aloud?

### EXTRA CREDIT

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Shtetl. Oy gevalt. Makher. Mazel tov. You may know some of the Yiddish words and phrases in the book. What do they mean? Many Yiddish words have become part of the American vernacular—like klutz or spiel. See if you can find others.

In “Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” Ethel is hopeful about the new president and FDR’s promise of new jobs. What was the New Deal? Visit [livingnewdeal.org](http://livingnewdeal.org) to find out more about New Deal projects undertaken where you live.

In 1935, Ethel became a union member and joined with others in demanding a salary of \$23 a week. Find out what the average weekly salary of a nineteen-year-old in the United States was then, and what it is today. Visit the US Bureau of Labor Statistics website at [bls.gov](http://bls.gov) for more information.

“Requiem for My Dear Papa,” is a poem about the death of Ethel’s father, Barney Greenglass. What was life like for an immigrant in New York City in the early 1900s? Visit [tenement.org](http://tenement.org) to learn about immigrant life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

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In “Senator Joseph McCarthy Is an Ugly Man,” the author describes McCarthy’s actions against “everyday citizens.” Find out more about how McCarthy fueled American’s fears about communism—and how his malicious accusations and unjust hearings negatively affected many lives. In 1954, McCarthy was rebuked on national television by Attorney Joseph Welch. The rebuke caused public sentiment to shift against McCarthy. Learn more at: [senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/mccarthy-hearings/have-you-no-sense-of-decency.htm](http://senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/mccarthy-hearings/have-you-no-sense-of-decency.htm).

The Manhattan Project and the making of the atomic bomb play a critical role in Ethel’s story, and Dovey’s time in Los Alamos, New Mexico, is especially significant. Who was Robert Oppenheimer? What is a fallout shelter? Where is Bikini Atoll, and what took place there during the 1940s and 1950s?

The title of the book, *Ethel’s Song*, speaks not only to the author sharing Ethel’s story, but also to Ethel’s love of music. Choose one of the songs mentioned in the book—such as “Ciribiribin” or “When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin’ Along” and listen to it online. Or listen to an aria from one of the operas mentioned, like the *Marriage of Figaro*.

### READING LIST

*Blacklisted! Hollywood, the Cold War, and the First Amendment* by Larry Dane Brimner  
*The Enemy* by Sara Holbrook  
*The Green Glass Sea* by Ellen Klages  
*Suspect Red* by L. M. Elliott  
*Sing and Shout! The Mighty Voice of Paul Robeson* by Susan Goldman Rubin  
*Fallout: Spies, Superbombs, and the Ultimate Cold War Showdown* by Steve Sheinkin  
*Bomb: The Race to Build –and Steal—the World’s Most Dangerous Weapon* by Steve Sheinkin

Guide written by Jane Becker