

The Apprentice

Study Guide

The Apprentice at a glance:

In *The Apprentice*, author Bill Allison uses the experiences of the main character Enoch Moyer to explore the life of a teenage apprentice in a small industrial city in the 1880s. The story tells about the first year of apprenticeship for a typical Victorian fourteen-year-old as his family signs a contract to indenture the boy with a merchant for a four year term. The merchant proves to be a strict master, and an older apprentice bullies the new boy. In the story Enoch discovers the secret to win the master's respect and disarm his rival. Enoch finds his only friends among other apprentices, a blind veteran, and the master's wife.

Early in the story Enoch uncovers a plot to destroy the merchant's business and drive his family out of town. Enoch and his friends foil the conspiracy and convince the authorities to punish the real criminals.

Written by: Bill Allison

Type of Work: Historical Novel

Genres: Bildungsroman (Coming of Age Novel)

Published: August 2015 by Infinity Publishing

Main Characters: Enoch Moyer, Joe McVey, Leopold Cohen, Lena Cohen, Fred Baker, John Brinker, Fes Freeman, Katy Moyer

Major Thematic Topics: Apprenticeship, the Self-improvement Movement, Education, the plight of war veterans, the nexus of Jewish immigrants and Gentile Americans in Victorian times, anti-Semitism, racism

Motifs: adolescence, faith, loyalty, friendship, diversity

Book summary:

The Apprentice is a novel about a fatherless fourteen-year-old whose family cannot afford to send him to high school and must arrange work for him away from home. The story covers a span of twelve months, the youth's first apprentice year, during which the characters go through significant changes.

The story takes place in Lewistown, Pennsylvania, an industrial city surrounded by farms. Enoch Moyer comes from a rural Pennsylvania Dutch family, descended from German immigrants of the 1700s. The master and his family are Jewish immigrants, recently arrived from Germany with an educated urban culture.

Eager for friends and advancement, Enoch enrolls in the community's apprentice association, helping a friend join as the first African-American. The town's apprentices bond in loyal friendship to challenge their town's conventions.

Enoch faces the issues of Victorian America, such as industrial pollution and cultural diversity. A mysterious blind vagrant wanders the streets, injured Civil War veterans struggle to survive, and radical tramps seize the railroad junction. Strife tears at rich and poor, urban and rural, black and white, and among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.

Enoch uncovers an anti-Semitic plot to drive out his master's family. He and his friends foil the crime to save his master and arrest the offenders. At the ensuing trial Enoch learns the hard lessons of justice and prompts the court to punish the real criminals.

The story is based from the author's grandfather's experiences during his years as an apprentice to a Jewish merchant in Lewistown. Using that as a base, the author studied microfilm of newspapers published in 1880 at the Mifflin County Historical Society. Having wandered the streets, the railroad station, hills and valleys in the region, Bill Allison portrays town and countryside to bring Victorian times to life.

Chapter Summations

Chapters 1-4: "Get up, Moyer! Old man's lookin' for you." Enoch's shocked awake on his first morning as an apprentice in Lewistown, Pennsylvania. Leopold Cohen, the master, harasses and pushes while Joe McVey, the older apprentice, finds ways to bully him. Only Lena Cohen, the master's wife, sympathizes and supports the new apprentice.

The apprenticeship means Enoch has to live with the master and his family for a term of four years. The bargain is that while the master will teach the apprentice how to be a merchant and feed and clothe the young boy, Enoch is to work both as a shop employee and as a servant of the family. It is September 1880

Enoch would have preferred to attend the Lewistown Academy, the only high school, because he enjoyed and excelled in education, but he is forced into apprenticeship because his family was made poor by the early death of his father.

The Cohen family is Jewish, following their faith's rules around food. The two apprentices eat separately from the Cohen family, but food is rich and plentiful. But, never will they have any meat from a pig – pork, bacon, or pork rinds. Recent immigrants from Germany, the Cohens speak broken English and sprinkle words of German in their vocabulary.

The store sells fabric, ready to wear clothing, and accessories like ribbons. Many customers buy fabric to make their own clothes in those times. It amazes Enoch just how much he has to learn about different kinds of cloth, the store's organization, and business.

Enoch befriends other apprentices while on an errand and is confronted by a stranger who wants to know his master's private business. The young apprentice is overwhelmed by learning the business, pressure from the master and Joe, and a feeling that some people don't like his master.

Chapters 5-6: The master conducts weekly business lessons on Monday evenings after supper. The master is pleased to discover Enoch has a knack for math, being able to solve problems in his head, but that angers Joe who slaps the new boy.

Besides learning the business, Enoch serves the family with domestic chores, such as emptying stove ashes and fixing broken appliances. Asked to fix a broken latch, he takes the part to his Uncle Fred, a blacksmith, where he encounters disabled Civil War veterans, including the mysterious blind one called Old Blinker.

Enoch wants to join the Lewistown Apprentice Association. Leopold Cohen at first won't let him but his wife Lena intervenes. Walking to the Association, he passes the Academy and is jealous of the school's high school students.

Enoch's new friends welcome him to the apprentice club. That night the club has a special guest speaker, the millionaire industrialist, Andrew Carnegie, who encourages the apprentices and values their practical experiences above academic schooling. Enoch feels better about his apprenticeship.

Chapters 7-9: The first Friday as an apprentice and Enoch learns a new role in the Cohen household, to be the *Shabbat goy*, the Sabbath gentile. He will assist the Cohen family to worship as Jewish people on Friday nights and during Saturday's business in the shop. While the family has a ritual meal, Enoch is to perform household tasks from which they are forbidden. Later, up in their loft, Joe McVey mocks the Cohen family.

On his first Saturday Enoch learns that both he and Joe have new roles, important to the business. Following his Jewish religion, Leopold, the master, would not handle money; so the boys must manage all transactions. Saturday is a busy shopping day in Lewistown, and the store is filled with customers.

Having impressed the master with his skill in math, Enoch is already allowed to serve customers, although he's been apprentice only a week. While the two apprentices help customers, Leopold Cohen engages customers in conversation. Enoch points out a shoplifter who Cohen teases until the man flees the store.

A teenage girl, Carol McKenna, buys ribbon from Enoch. Her snobbish mother makes insulting remarks about 'shop boys' and Carol apologizes for her rudeness. Although Carol attends the Academy, Enoch and she like each other.

As Carol and her mother leave the store, Old Blinker, the blind man from Uncle Fred's blacksmith shop, is knocked down outside the shop window. The master rushes to help the old man, calling him 'captain' and seating him inside the shop.

Other than meeting Carol McKenna, Enoch had a hard day and dislikes his apprenticeship. As a final blow, Enoch has to bathe in the same water that Joe uses.

The next morning is Sunday. Joe has gone to visit his family, and Enoch attends church with his mother, Katy Moyer. He's teased by other teenagers when Momma embraces him like a child. He's insulted by the Pastor's praising new students from the Academy, but not new apprentices. Bored during the sermon, he looks around at a picture of Jesus and the disciples, all blonds.

Outside again, he drives the family buggy, led by Blitzen the horse, to his father's grave at the cemetery where they have a picnic next to the gravestone. Enoch enjoys the food, especially the pork rinds. Enoch asks his mother many questions about his father, who he never knew. Enoch's mother speaks broken English because her first language is *Deitch* which is spoken by the Pennsylvania Dutch.

Enoch hears people shouting from the Juniata River bank. From the edge of the cemetery he sees many African-American families praising a Black teenage boy who's caught several fish.

After the picnic his mother returns Enoch to the shop. The Cohen family are gathered sitting on the sidewalk. Lena Cohen makes compliments about Enoch to Katy Moyer, his mother. Enoch sits and opens a bag of pork rinds and offers one to three-year-old Arthur. The Cohen grandfather slaps the rind out of the child's hand into the dirt.

Chapters 10-12: The next Sunday Enoch again joins Katy Moyer in church, but this time Enoch is free to roam Lewistown afterwards. He goes fishing along the bank of the Juniata River. There he meets the same Black teenager he saw before, Fes Freeman. Together they catch several fish. Fes asks many questions about being an apprentice.

The boys bring fish back home. Enoch meets Fes's mother and minister, Pastor Allen. Inside the church Enoch sees a picture of a Black Jesus and twelve Black disciples, wondering about how the real Jesus would have looked. The pastor tells the boys about how Fes' grandfather escaped slavery, came to Lewistown, and was captured by slavecatchers, only to be freed by Lewistown apprentices. Fes wants to become an apprentice, too.

Enoch bring fish back to the Cohen's home where he's welcomed into a family party. Lena plays a familiar tune on the violin as Enoch sings a folk song in the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect. At the

privy, Enoch encounters a drunk Joe McVey who he secrets up to the loft, so that the master won't fire him.

Next day Joe has a hangover, but again the master brings the boys into his office for another lesson. This time Enoch demonstrates an advanced knowledge of math, and Cohen offers the first praise. The master is impressed that Enoch met the great industrialist Andrew Carnegie at the apprentice association. Joe seethes in jealous rage and leaves the office for the loft.

Enoch checks out a rumor that Leopold Cohen had been a peddler in the Civil War, selling to both the North and the South. Cohen, though, refuses to discuss that.

On the way upstairs to the loft, Joe tries to attack Enoch, but the younger boy thwarts the blow and bends back Joe's fingers against his knuckles. They curse each other, and Joe threatens revenge.

Another day, the train station sends a message to Leopold Cohen that a big order has arrived from New York. The master sends Enoch to arrange for horses and a wagon, then find helpers to unload the freight car at the station. After arranging the horse wagon, Enoch picks up Fes Freeman to help and earn 25 cents and they all drive to Lewistown's train station.

The master looks for his freight car while the boys look around the station. Peering inside Enoch and Fes see a telegraph operator working code by taking and sending messages electronically. Homeless tramps interrupt and beg for money. Fes refuses but Enoch hands over two cents. They notice tramps living in empty boxcars.

Re-joining the master, Leopold Cohen argues with the station master and refuses to pay unless the delivered order is complete. Argument settled, the boys help to unload the delivery and then carry the boxes upstairs to the loft. Walking Fes back home, Enoch proposes that Fes ask Uncle Fred, the blacksmith, for an apprenticeship.

Chapters 13-15: In the November presidential election Republican James Garfield has won, but the master focuses on his store's advertising. Looking over Cohen's shoulder, Enoch sees a notice for the Academy's examinations. He still misses the opportunity to attend high school and fondly remembers his eighth grade teacher, the eccentric Miss Lizzie Book.

On the way to pay the stable for the horse wagon, he asks his Uncle Fred if he wants an apprentice. At first the blacksmith refuses but let's Enoch bring a candidate. Enoch introduces Fes Freeman, and Fes passes the blacksmith's test. Uncle Fred offers him an apprenticeship.

The disabled veterans, who sit all day watching Fred, grumble against hiring Fes because he's black. Old Blinker argues back, puts the racist in his place, but Uncle Fred predicts that Fes won't be admitted to the Apprentice Association. "They'll never take no colored boy."

Enoch uncovers a plan to slander his teacher, Miss Book, with a poem against women teachers. Written by a personal enemy, Henry Bergholtz, the plan is to publish the poem in the town's newspaper. Enoch takes a copy to Lena Cohen and explains the background. Mrs. Cohen has high values on education. She goes to the newspaper owner, threatening to drop her husband's advertising and the poem is never published.

Leopold Cohen softens to tell Enoch about his Civil War experiences. As a teenager, he had just arrived from Germany to walk from Union soldiers' camp to Confederate soldiers' camp selling clothing or mending torn uniforms. He was almost murdered once, but saved by an officer's intervention.

It is a cold December Saturday when Enoch takes little Arthur Cohen into the busy farmer's market to buy potatoes. There they find Old Blinker, the sightless war veteran. Old Blinker calls over the two boys, asking if Enoch can guide him to the train station. Back at the shop, Enoch asks permission, using a mysterious code term 'captain's orders.' It is quickly granted by the master who reveals Old Blinker's real name, Captain John Brinker.

Enoch guides Brinker over the bridge and into the railroad yards among abandoned train cars. Homeless tramps confront the old man and the young boy. One tramp knows Captain Brinker from a Civil War battle, and Brinker identifies him as a Molly Maguire on the run from a murder charge. The Molly threatens Captain Brinker until the old man delivers a warning that the town is angry at all the tramps and plans to drive them away tonight, either with armed lawmen or with a violent mob. The tramps scoff at the warning.

Captain Brinker and the apprentice return to Cohen's store. The old man warns Leopold that an armed mob is forming and once excited, a mob may attack his store. Although it's Saturday, the master closes up, telling Lena to take the rest of the family to the back rooms. Then, the master and Captain Brinker sit outside the store, armed with a handgun.

Meanwhile, Enoch and Joe join a crowd on the bridge with the county sheriff and his deputies. The sheriff warns the crowd to stay back and let the deputies arrest the tramps. Armed with several weapons, men on the bridge will stop tramps from entering the town, but the tramps have already left.

Chapters 16-18: Next day, Enoch overhears men arguing about Leopold Cohen. One is making anti-Semitic remarks about the Cohens promoting Christmas, a Christian holiday. He wonders how to protect his master. The Cohens decorate the store with garlands and ribbons and sponsor a Christmas parade through town on Saturday before the holiday. Celebrating a festive Christmas with decorations, evergreen trees, feasting, and wrapped gifts is a new idea in America, and some people suspect the Cohen's motives. Enoch helps the Cohen's with ideas so that the town will approve and come to shop.

Meanwhile, Lena Cohn trains the Academy students and a few apprentices as a Christmas chorus to sing carols on the courthouse steps during the day and at night sing Handel's Messiah. Lewistown residents come to favor the Cohens as community leaders, and by Christmas Eve, their store has been bought out of all goods and shelves are empty.

Christmas and Enoch is free only one day to visit his mother, Katy Moyer. Enoch catches a train and walks to his home village. On the way he has time to think about a Christmas party the previous night. The wealthy family of Carol McKenna had invited Academy students and apprentices, everyone dressed up. Henry Bergholtz taunts Enoch and makes insulting remarks about Carol's family. Even though other apprentices try to stop him, Enoch punches Henry and bloodies his nose.

Walking alone on the snowy road, he's glad when he arrives at the village of Vira. A poor widow, Enoch's mother loves and cares for her young son. The boy realizes how much he misses his home as Katy prepares his favorite food and sings a lullaby. Lulled into a day dream, Enoch recalls how the Cohens gave each apprentice a fine wool coat, but Joe wouldn't take it home to show his parents. Enoch wakes to realize he must return to the city and carry on his responsibilities as a young man.

Chapters 18-21: The next day Enoch catches a train to a remote town where he must hike into the Seven Mountains. His mission is to meet Joe McVey and bring back deer pelts. The McVey family is also poor, but Joe's father, Jackson McVey, is a violent, abusive alcoholic. The father whips Joe when he hears that the boy withheld the coat from his family. Enoch has never seen such a vicious adult, in contrast to his upbringing by Katy Moyer. Joe is bitter and sullen as they return to Lewistown on the train the next morning.

Leopold Cohen and a group of men gather to talk around a heated stove on a snowy March day. A new doctor had arrived in Lewistown. An immigrant from Scotland, Dr. MacPherson practices a different and strange kind of medicine, using carbolic acid to sterilize wounds and medical instruments. The town people are puzzled about the theory of germs. Old Blinker reveals he taught high school before the Civil War.

The door opens and a lady arrives with a blast of snow. She's Miss Lizzie Book, Enoch's teacher, and she's hurting from a sore foot. Lena Cohen makes a big fuss when she realizes she is the teacher who was insulted by the student's poem. Mrs. Cohen examines Miss Book's foot and suggests they go to the new doctor. Enoch helps to support his teacher down the street.

Doctor Donald MacPherson's office has too many patients to see Miss Book's foot, so they postpone the appointment for the next day. Lena Cohen remarks that the doctor seems to be a single man. Next day, Enoch sits in the doctor's waiting room and meets Jack Taft, the telegraph operator. The telegraph operator welcomes Enoch to visit his office and tap a key.

Lena Cohen arranges to match-make the teacher Lizzie Book with the doctor Donald McPherson for a formal candlelight dinner party. She also invites Enoch so he can experience a higher level of culture. Joe McVey mocks his fellow apprentice. It's plain that Joe is threatened by anything better than himself. At the party Enoch is shocked to see his teacher so adorned with a fine dress, cosmetics, and special hairdo. The Cohens are also in formal attire. Enoch is shocked again when Doctor McPherson arrives and sits next to Miss Book. The boy feels overwhelmed by jealousy, especially when the doctor impresses his teacher. Then the doctor ridicules American education, so Enoch quotes Andrew Carnegie deploring Scotland as a 'land of class and privilege and not a land of opportunity.'" The adults are as shocked at Enoch's attack as the boy is embarrassed.

It's early spring and snow still cover the land. The apprentices prepare to go fishing on the Juniata River. Enoch introduces Fes to the others. Fes leads everyone to a unique island called Teardrop where they catch fish and broil them on a camp fire. When the boys learn that Fes is an apprentice too, they suggest he join the Apprentice Association. Enoch cautions that their adult advisor, Attorney McKee, and the other masters would prevent a "colored" apprentice from joining.

Enoch asks Old Blinker about overhearing anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish) remarks. The old man tells how Leopold Cohen got into trouble with Civil War soldiers. He, as Captain Brinker, had to save the young Leopold. The story hints that Enoch has to stand up for his friend. So, Enoch confronts Attorney McKee, persuading him to agree to Fes Freeman as a member. Then, Enoch has to persuade Fes to pioneer as the first African-American in the Apprentice Association.

Chapters 22-25: The Sentinel newspaper story reads "President Garfield shot," and Leopold Cohen worries that Jewish people will be blamed. Being so pleased with Enoch's performance, the master offers him an allowance increase to two dollars. The apprentice asks for more freedom to learn new skills, and the master agrees. Enoch runs to the train station to ask Jack Taft for telegraph lessons. Taft agrees and tells the boy to call him Jack.

On a hot Sunday August afternoon Enoch discovers Captain Brinker, Miss Book, and Doctor MacPherson visiting the Cohens. The boy abruptly challenges the doctor to cure the captain's blindness. The doctor agrees, and they all walk to his clinic. On examination the doctor finds Captain Brinker's injury, a cavity where a rifle butt had smashed his head. It's a hopeless case. Sight can't be restored. Miss Books suggests there may be books for the blind.

Three-year-old Arthur Cohen accidentally lights himself afire, and Joe McVey takes swift action to douse the flames and save the little boy. Dr. MacPherson declares the boy will recover.

The Cohens plan to leave Enoch and Joe alone at the store while they go to a Harrisburg synagogue to observe the high holy days of the Jewish religion: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. For twelve days only Lena's brother would be the only adult present during business hours. Joe acts suspiciously, spending much time away.

Carol McKenna reports that Joe is seen coming from the rival store, Cunningham's. She suspects the malicious apprentice of plotting against the Cohens and against Enoch.

The first night alone, Joe brings a meal to share into the Cohen's dining room – roast pork, the food forbidden in a Kosher household. Enoch is outraged and takes his plate outside. Joe offers to do Enoch a favor of a night off to visit his mother, but Enoch declines, wondering what Joe is up to.

Meanwhile, news arrives that the wounded President Garfield died from his gunshot in late September, just as the Cohens leave for the holidays. Most town residents gather at the station to watch the funeral train pass on the way to Ohio. Drunks, led by the disgusting Hess, accost Doctor McPherson because all the president's doctors couldn't save him, but McPherson answers back unafraid.

Tuesday night at the Apprentices' Association Fes Freeman warns Enoch about trouble brewing, and calls for a secret meeting on Teardrop Island, away from the town. Fes has heard about plans to bring a Philadelphia criminal to crack open a safe. The boys guess the targeted safe is in Leopold Cohen's office, but decide not to tell the sheriff and constables because no adult would believe them. They guess the plot calls for a break-in on Saturday night, after all the shopping when as much as two thousand dollars would be locked in the safe.

All that Saturday Enoch is anxious, and he worries more when the nasty Hess brings a visitor to Joe, introducing him as 'the rabbit'. A strange character with buckteeth protruding from his mouth, 'the rabbit' wears calfskin gloves over pencil-thin hands. After Lena Cohen's brother locks up the money, he departs for home, leaving Enoch and Joe. Joe quickly excuses himself as if he's going home to the Seven Mountains. All the streets are bare of traffic and all the stores turn dark. At the back door Enoch let in his friends Fes, Will, Nate, and Jack. They mount the stairs to the apprentice loft and wait for the robbers. Enoch falls asleep until Fes slaps his leg. "Wake up. They're here."

Chapters 26-30: The apprentices try to creep past the robbers who are intent on opening the safe, but they're caught. Hess holds the master's gun on them, threatening to shoot. Joe wants to shoot them all, but punches Enoch instead. Hess argues about who's boss with the Rabbit, but the Rabbit springs a knife at Hess's throat. All the boys are shoved back into the loft and the door is locked. The thieves succeed in looting Cohen's safe and escape.

Being the smallest, Enoch is lowered out the front window by a sheet onto Cohen's awning. He runs to wake up the town and bring a constable, but the robbers have already run to catch a train at the station. Nate opens the telegraph office, and Enoch turns on the machinery to warn the stations to stop the robbers.

Police down the track stop the train and arrest the three thieves who are brought back to Lewistown. Enoch visits jail to see Joe. Lena Cohen has sent food. Joe, unremorseful, is

mistaken to think his friends will be freed. At the trial a fancy Philadelphia lawyer represents Hess and the Rabbit. Calvin McKee, the apprentices' sponsor represents Joe McVey. The whole town, including the Cohens, the disabled veterans, Old Blinker, Joe's father Jackson McVey, Carol McKenna, and many others attend. Doctor MacPherson will preside as foreman of the jury. Testimony by Captain John Brinker, Old Blinker, nails down the true criminals.

The jury finds both Hess and the Rabbit guilty; for Joe McVey the charges are declared "not proven." Is he guilty or innocent? The jury finds the case to be unconvincing and there will be a stain upon him forever in Lewistown.

Joe decides to leave town, and Enoch sees him off. At the same time, Captain John Brinker is also leaving for Boston to resume teaching at a school for the blind.

Captain Brinker challenges Enoch to become either a great merchant or learn the telegraph and work across the United States. He asks the boy to write and tell him about the next chapter in his life.

Questions:

1. Compare and contrast Joe and Enoch. What experiences has they brought from their homes to make them so different?
2. The industrialist Andrew Carnegie has strong opinions about business competition, comparing it to the law of the jungle. What is good and what is bad about that viewpoint?
3. Enoch sees pictures of Jesus in two churches, one African-American, the other Lutheran. How differently was he portrayed? Why are such portraits ironic?
4. Enoch was contracted to serve four years as an apprentice. Compare and contrast apprenticeship in 1880 from slavery before the Civil War (1861-65).
5. Why are some people in the town so against the Cohen's store?
6. Reading the apprentice contract, was this a fair bargain between Enoch's family and Leopold Cohen?
7. Joe McVey saves the child Arthur, although Joe hates the Cohens. Is this a change of character for surly apprentice?
8. The jury rules the charges against Joe are "unproven." What convinced them not to find him guilty?
9. How are today's apprentices different from the 1800s? Describe the differences.
10. Some people in the town suspect the Cohens and don't accept them. Why?