Twelve-year-old Zippy, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, keeps a diary account of the first eighteen months of her family's life on the Lower East Side of New York City in 1903-1904.

It seems I like all the Dear America books, and this one is no exception. Although I read them for myself, and these books are certainly entertaining and interesting for adults, I try to review them as a parent would, to allow the concerned parent to understand what their child is reading.
The Good: Although I was expecting something a little more along the lines of The Jungle and a little less along the lines of Fiddler on the Roof, this book does manage to neatly encapsulate the life of an immigrant to America in the early 1900s. The author skims briefly over their stay at Ellis islands, the perfunctory and frightening medical exams, and the cramped apartment living that waits them in the new world. This is dealt with in a light vein, and the overall tone is never dim or depressing. The life of the family is never terribly hard - the mother starts a sewing business more to stay occupied than to bring in money, and the father is offered a position at the local university teaching violin. Because the immigrant hardships are toned down so much (slightly to my disappointment, but it is a childrens book, after all), the conflict in the book comes from the social changes within the family - one daughter becomes involved in unions and suffrage activities, another daughter romances and marries a non-Jewish boy, the father slowly stops following the Orthodox manner of dress and grooming, to the mothers horror and consternation. As the family is absorbed into this new culture, they have to decide - reminiscent of Fiddler on the Roof - which traditions are sacrosanct and which traditions can be abandoned for the new ways.

The Bad: This is the stuff that isnt bad, per se, but that parents might want to be aware of, depending on the age and maturity of the child. Although the theme of immigrant hardships is largely ignored, the book does feature two sudden deaths - one a newborn infant, and the second a worker who dies from unsafe working conditions involving a warehouse fire. The imagery is moved over as swiftly as possible, but the concept is disturbing and may be difficult for a young child. One of the daughters routinely sneaks out at night to see her non-Jewish boyfriend. There is never any indication that the young lovers are doing anything more than holding hands and kissing, though. Lastly, depending on how orthodox your religious beliefs are, the mother can come off as an unsympathetic character. She routinely and openly alienates several members of the family for not being religious enough. Although this issue is resolved by the end, the mother can come across as caring more about her religion than about her family, depending on your own point of view.

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