

# MY BROTHER'S SECRET BY DAN SMITH


## SYNOPSIS


*My Brother's Secret explores the moral dilemma faced by a young boy who is desperate to find into his nation's ideal of being a patriotic German.*

Twelve year old Karl Friedmann is a proud member of the Deutsches Jungvolk, a group for German boys too young to join the Hitler Youth. They are trained to be fit and fearless so they can one day fight for the Fuhrer. At home, Karl's older brother Stefan, tells him that he does not have to wear a uniform to be a good German. Karl accuses Stefan of being a coward because he left school so he would not have to join the Hitler Youth. On his twelfth birthday, Karl's family receives a telegram informing them their father has died in action in Russia. Their mother, Hannah, collapses in shock. Stefan decides to go and get their grandparents, Opa and Oma. When Stefan puts on his jacket, Karl notices a white flower embroidered on the inside pocket. He questions Stefan about it, but Stefan tells Karl to forget about it. Oma and Opa bring everyone to their home in Cologne. Karl wants to join the local school and the town's Deutsches Jungvolk troop but Stefan tells him that Opa and Oma want to keep him home for some time. They want him to think about his involvement with the Nazi "stuff".

In Cologne, Karl meets a new friend, Lisa Herz, and she encourages Karl to think more deeply about the Deutsches Jungvolk, about Hitler, and about the war. Karl begins to see things differently, but his curiosity leads him to wonder about the white flower embroidered inside his brother's jacket. When he asks Oma and Opa about it, they refuse to tell him what it means, and they warn Stefan not to let anyone else see it. Karl is convinced that the flower means something, and that it is connected to the anti-Nazi graffiti on the walls in town. He is determined to find out more, but his curiosity leads him and his new friend, Lisa, towards a deadly confrontation with Gerhard Wolff, the local Gestapo officer.

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## **WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS . . .**

*Brothers often fight - and feel that their parents just don't understand or take unfair sides. But when taking sides becomes a matter of life and death, then the brothers in Dan Smith's war-time Germany have to make some tough decisions together. Based on real second world war events, this brilliant story gives a feeling of what life was like when children were faced with real evil and conflict. Fighting for our freedom - who knows if it may be something we have to choose again one day!*

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

## **AUTHOR BACKGROUND**

Growing up, Dan Smith led three lives. In one he survived the day-to-day humdrum of boarding school, while in another he travelled the world, finding adventure in the padi-fields of South East Asia and the jungles of Brazil. But the third life he lived in a world of his own, making up stories . . . which is where some people say he still lives most of the time!

He lives in Newcastle with his wife and two children.

## **AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

*A couple of years ago, a memorial was erected in a small village near Newcastle to commemorate the bombing of that village in 1942. It was the village where my great-grandparents lived, and one of the victims of the bombing was their nine year old adopted son, Clive. I suppose that's what sparked the story for My Friend The Enemy; I started to wonder what life would have been like for Clive. While writing that book, and researching how people felt about 'the enemy' I started to wonder what it would have been like to grow up in Germany during WWII, and decided to write a second novel, set at exactly the same time about a child the same age, but seeing the war from a different perspective.*

**Describe My Brother's Secret in three words . . .**

***Exciting. Thought-provoking. Emotional.***



# THEMES

- War
- Friendship
- Courage and Bravery
- Trust
- Bullying
- Nazism
- Secrecy
- Rebellion

# WRITING STYLE

My Brother's Secret is an exciting historical adventure story, set against the backdrop of the Second World War. The writing is descriptive and reflective, and depicts the historical and cultural environment of Germany during the early 1940's. There is a strong emphasis on the development of friendship and trust, and much of the drama is played out on a domestic level. Family relationships form a significant part of the novel. The main characters face moral dilemmas in the face of extreme beliefs and a dangerous political environment. The novel explores the effects of propaganda, Nazism, and finding the courage to stand up for what you believe is right.

# PUPIL ACTIVITIES

## 1. War Game

In the first chapter, Karl and his friends are playing a war game in the woods. They are acting as if they are soldiers. The game is rough and violent, and involves each player wearing a 'ribbon-of-life' which opponents have to take in order to 'kill' the other team. What do you think about those words - 'kill' and 'ribbon-of-life'? Why are those words used, and what effect might they have on the way the boys play the game? Discuss with students how they would feel about being involved in a game like this. Would it be fun? Would they feel afraid? How far would they go to win? Would they be prepared to hurt the other players - as Karl and his friends are prepared to hurt others?

## 2. As Strong as Krupps Steel

The opening chapters describe Karl's experiences in the Deutsches Jungvolk, and demonstrate the brutality of the Nazi regime. By describing Karl's indoctrination in Nazi racial theories and his belief that he must be strong as Krupp steel (Krupp was a steel company which made war weapons for Germany during both world wars) the setting and tone of the novel are quickly established. Karl is young and easily won over to the Nazi ideals. Like most young boys, he wants to fit in and he wants to fight for his beloved Germany. Discuss how important is it to fit in. Is it difficult to have ideas that are different from other people's? Do students think they would do something that they knew, in their heart, was wrong, just because everybody else was doing it?

## 3. Following the Rules

As the story unfolds, Karl finds his views on the Nazis beginning to change. Seeing how Kriminalinspektor Wolff treats his beloved grandfather, Karl notes that *"When I was at school with Ralf and Martin, the idea of people being punished for not following the rules felt right, but I wasn't so sure now."* Is it important to always follow the rules? Is there ever a time when it is right to question the rules? Discuss.

#### **4. Guilt and Remorse**

Later on Stefan points out to Karl the reality of life under Nazi rule. After the leaflets are dropped, Stefan tells Karl what happens to people who oppose the Nazis. *"You just have to say something, think something. All it takes is for one person to tell the Gestapo and that's the end of it. Some people even report their own family."* Stefan tells Karl that people are sent away to die in camps and not as he believes "to learn how to be better Germans." Karl begins to realise that he has been a part of something terrible and is filled with guilt and remorse. Is Karl right to feel guilty? Has he been foolish to believe in Hitler? How would *your* students feel if they were in Karl's position. Ask students to pretend they are Karl, and write a letter to Stefan telling him how they feel about what he has just told them.

#### **5. Newspaper Article**

Karl and his friend Lisa witness Herr Finkel being terrorized and taken away by the Gestapo. Split students into two groups. One group can pretend they work for a Nazi newspaper and have to write a report of what happened at the shop when Herr Finkel was arrested. The other group can pretend to they work for an anti-Nazi newspaper and have to write a report of what happened at the shop. How do the two reports compare?

#### **6. Character Description**

Karl is a thoughtful but reckless boy. This makes him a realistic character because he doesn't suddenly turn against the Nazis. He experiences internal conflict as his eyes are opened. Karl's character changes as the story unfolds. Asks students to do the following: A) Write a short description of Karl's character as he is at the beginning of the book. B) Write a short description of Karl's character as he is at the end of the book.

## 7. Change

As a class, discuss how Karl's character changes over the course of the story. Individually, students can then write a list of the key events that cause him to change.

## 8. Interview

At the beginning of the book, Karl and Stefan both have very different feelings about the Nazis and about how they like to spend their spare time. How does this affect the relationship between the brothers? Do they get along? Do they fight? Students can try using direct speech to write an interview with Stefan, asking him how he feels about his younger brother.

## 9. Argument

Karl finds out that his brother Stefan is a member of the Edelweiss Pirates, a group of young people who love Germany but hate the Nazis. They are involved in anti-Nazi trouble-making around the town, and know that if they are caught, they will get into big trouble. Ask students to imagine one of their friends is a member of the Edelweiss Pirates, and they ask them to join. Write a list of reasons why they might decide to join. Write a list of reasons why they might decide **not** to join. What would be their final decision?

## 10. Diary

In the chapter titled **Wooden Flower**, Karl meets Lisa for the first time. Karl hasn't met many girls before, and he doesn't quite know how to speak to her, but they manage to form a friendship which becomes stronger and stronger over the course of the book. Ask students to imagine that Lisa keeps a diary. What would she write about the day she meets Karl?

## 11. Education

Karl tells Oma that when he is at school he learns about mathematics, science, weapons, running, and boxing. He thinks cooking is for girls because, in Nazi Germany, girls went to school to learn how to be good housewives. Girls learned how to cook, and how to look after babies. What do your students think about this? Should girls and boys learn different things? Ask them to write an argument between Karl and Lisa, in which Lisa is trying to persuade Karl that girls can do all the same things that boys can do.

## 12. Review

Ask students to write a review of *My Brother's Secret*. What is the main story? Who are the main characters? What do the main characters want? What happens to them?

## 13. Air Raid

There is an air raid over the city where Karl is staying with Oma and Opa. There are no young men to help clear up - they are away fighting the war - so the older men rally together to help clear up after the raid. Ask students to write a newspaper report about the bombing.

## 14. Prediction

How do your students think Karl and Stefan's lives will change after the end of the book? Will everything go back to the way it was? How would the brothers feel about each other? Is their bond stronger now? Ask students to write a new, short, chapter set the next morning, when Karl and Stefan wake up in their shared bedroom. What happens between them? What would they talk about?

## 15. Leaflet Drop

In *My Brother's Secret*, the 'Edelweiss Pirates' attempt to subvert Nazi doctrine by distributing leaflets that resemble Nazi propaganda; but leaflets that put forward a very different message. For pupils that are unaware of the forms of propaganda prevalent in the Second World War, the novel provides an excellent opportunity to explore this phenomenon. Perhaps starting with the numerous examples on the internet, pupils could discuss how these posters and leaflets make us view the subject of the propaganda, and what it is that makes us hate one particular character (or type of character) and love another. Pupils could take one of these images and attempt to subvert it - in a similar way to the Edelweiss Pirates - by using similar imagery to tell a different story about the war. These could be directed at German or Allied audiences, and could target specific political figures (such as Hitler), or focus on picking holes in the argument for war in general.

## 16. That's What I Heard

When Karl and Lisa find themselves queuing up outside Herr Finkel's shop, they cannot help overhearing some of the conversations going on around them. On page 89, they overhear Frau Oster talking to her friend about the lack of provisions in Germany and how they feel sure Hitler will win the war for Germany soon. After a while the two women move away and Karl is no longer able to follow their conversation. However, this short excerpt gives us an insight into what was happening in Germany at the time, and who was in charge (Hitler). It is often surprising how much information we can pick up through a short piece of dialogue. Using this passage of the novel as an example, pupils could be tasked with writing pieces of overheard dialogue between two or more people that reveal something about the time and setting of the piece. Pupils could research different historical periods, or different cultures, and devise a short script that gives clues as to the location and subject matter. These short scenes could be acted out, with other pupils being tasked with guessing where and when the piece is set, and what the people in conversation are talking about. This task could even be focussed solely on the Second World War, with pupils writing scenes that involve notable historical figures, or scenes that reveal the situation in different parts of the world at that time.



## 17. Toeing the Party Line

From what we learn about Nazi Germany in *My Brother's Secret*, it is clear that it was very difficult for people to express any views or feelings that were out of step with the regime. While we discover Stefan, and later Karl, hold ideas that are opposed to those of the Führer, we are made aware that it would be very dangerous for either of them to express these views. What seems to keep many people 'in line' is a deep-seated fear about what might happen to them if they are suspected of thinking or acting in a way that is not in keeping with the Nazi ideal. In order to reinforce the way in which control is maintained through an unquestioning adherence to a set of strict rules, pupils could be faced with similar restrictions on their liberty. A set of rules could be drawn up that pupils must obey for a given period of time (perhaps one week at school). These rules need not be overly limiting, but they should force pupils to become aware of what they do or say, and whether or not this is in keeping with the 'rules' (obviously, this would be in addition to, and not at the expense of, the established school rules). For example, 'pupils must carry a copy of the dictionary at all times', 'all pupils must stand aside when a teacher passes', 'all pupils must be able to recite the three class nursery rhymes on demand' etc. These physical rules could also be added to with more general expectations in terms of pupils' attitude and demeanor. Where Hitler asked for 'a brutal, domineering, fearless, cruel youth', pupils might be expected to 'strive to be the first to finish set work', or 'show total concentration throughout the school day'. Furthermore, it would be interesting to impose some ideological 'givens' that pupils must respect, such as 'Justin Bieber is the greatest singer of all time', or 'Left-handed people have superior intellects'. This task should not be overly arduous or taken too seriously. It should really be done with a sense of fun! The onus is for pupils to experience what it might be like to have to live and work in a very restrictive environment. Throughout the time this activity is taking place pupils could also be encouraged to pass on information about their fellow pupils - those that break the new rules, or appear to eschew the new class ideology - by writing their names and their contraventions on pieces of paper and anonymously posting them in a collection box. This would, to some extent, help recreate the sense of fear that would have existed in Nazi Germany, and these contraventions could be revealed to the class at the end of the given time period. Following this, it might be enlightening for pupils to write about their experiences; how they coped with the rules imposed upon them, and how it made them feel about themselves and those around them. Finally, the class might consider what living in restricted ways indefinitely (as those in Nazi Germany would have done) might have on their happiness and relationships with other people.

## 18. The Blame Game

On page 224, Karl arrives at the conclusion that 'it's all my fault'. Here he is referring to the fact that his brother, Stefan, has been taken away by the Gestapo and that his family is now being terrorised by Gerhard Wolff. On the next page, Lisa tells him, 'it isn't your fault, Karl Friedmann. If it wasn't for Wolff and the Hitler Youth and that horrible man Hitler, none of this would have happened.' The notions of blame and guilt are central to the novel, with Karl often questioning the morality of what he does. This provides an opportunity for pupils to think about the extent to which Karl should be held accountable for the things that happen. Can Stefan's capture be entirely due to Karl? Or, as Lisa suggests, is Karl blameless? These questions are not straightforward. When we start to consider to what extent Karl should be blamed for the Pirates' leaflet being found, we find ourselves weighing up whose actions are most reprehensible: Karl's for leaving the leaflet in a place it might be found, Gerhard Wolff's for searching through Karl's room, or Adolf Hitler's for causing former friends and neighbours to become mistrusting of one another in the first place? Pupils could pick out specific moments in the novel to study in depth, moments at which a number of characters could potentially be held responsible for a particular event taking place. For example, the discovery of the Pirates' leaflet (and the subsequent arrest of Stefan), the arrest of Herr Finkel, or Stefan's arrest after the fight with the Hitler Youth boys. Pupils could assume the guise of different characters in each scenario, having to argue where the blame for the incident should lie. This could be done in front of the class, perhaps with the teacher cross-examining these 'characters' as though they were in a courtroom. The pupils observing this could be tasked with discussing on whom they think the blame should be placed (if, indeed, it can be placed solely on one character). Ultimately, the pupils would need to pass judgement on each of the characters, explaining why they have arrived at their point of view.

## 19. If Things Had Been Different...

Arguably, *My Brother's Secret* ends with some sort of victory for Karl and Stefan. With Gerhard Wolff dead, Karl's family are no longer under suspicion; and Stefan is safely home, having been released by the Gestapo. However, the ending would likely be very different had Karl, Stefan and Lisa decided not to return to Gestapo headquarters after Wolff is killed. Stefan would have been hunted as an escaped prisoner, and Karl would never have been able to steal the files the Gestapo were keeping on them and falsify Wolff's signature on Stefan's release order. The decision they make at this point in the story is therefore a pivotal moment. It would be a different story if the three had made a different decision here, and pupils could try to rewrite the ending of the novel based on their making a decision other than the one Dan Smith has written. After the class has had the opportunity to resolve their new endings in some way, it would be interesting to share these; comparing the various endings that could result from a choice made in a single moment of time.

## WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do we learn about the ideology of the Nazi regime from the lessons Karl attends (page 16)? How might other distinct ideologies be reflected in a school timetable? Devise a timetable that demonstrates an adherence to a particular ideology. Is this a 'healthy' education?
2. Re-read the Adolf Hitler quote at the start of the novel. Do you think Hitler would have considered Karl weak for helping Johann Weber up after the fight (page 21)? Do you consider him weak?
3. Do you think Karl was right to stop Jana from killing the Hitler Youth boy (page 198)? What would the likely consequences be for the characters in the novel if Jana had not been stopped?
4. Can you blame Karl for telling on Stefan to Axel Jung (page 227)? Give reasons for your answer.

# RESEARCH

- The Edelweiss Pirates were real. See what you can find out about them. How old were they? Where did they come from? What did they believe in?
- In *My Brother's Secret*, allied planes drop propaganda leaflets on the city where Karl lives. There are also Nazi propaganda posters on the wall in Herr Finkel's shop. Find out more about propaganda during WWII. Look for examples on-line. Think about how propaganda works. Do we still use propaganda today?
- Karl's father is killed in action while fighting against the Russians. In June 1941, Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union in what was known as 'Operation Barbarossa'. See what you can find out about Operation Barbarossa.
- In *My Brother's Secret*, we find out what it might have been like to grow up in Nazi Germany. What was it like to grown up in other countries during the war?
- In *My Brother's Secret*, the city where Karl lives with Oma and Opa is bombed. Find out about bombing during WWII. What kinds of bombs were used? What cities were targeted, and why? How did cities protect themselves from bombing raids?
- Food was scarce during WWII and many countries had rationing. Karl mentions that he has 'boiled potatoes with herring sauce and a small dollop of sauerkraut' - which does not sound very tasty! What did people in England eat during WWII?