

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?

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?