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The CASE of VIKTOR and NADYA'S NOTEBOOKS

## DAVIDE MOROSINOTTO





### A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

n the early weeks of March 2020, when Italy was in the middle of its nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19, restaurants, theaters, schools, libraries, shops—everything—was closed, and people were not allowed to go outside their homes, except for emergencies or for grocery shopping once a week.

I'm a professional writer, and I spent those weeks in my home country of Italy working on a new novel and reading books. Sometimes I participated in online chats with my readers, who are usually teenagers. (Obviously we used videoconferencing.) One of the discussions was about *Red Stars*, a novel I wrote in 2017, which had been published that year.

*Red Stars* is set in the USSR in 1941, during World War II, and is based on real history. I wrote about kids being loaded onto trains so they could flee Leningrad before the city was attacked by German troops. My protagonists, Viktor and Nadya, are twelve-year-old twins who must say goodbye to their parents. By mistake, the twins are assigned to different trains and must separate. They make a promise to reunite no matter what. It's no spoiler to say that this will be harder than they expect.

My work is a historical novel about war, about love, about struggling and fighting to survive through the difficulties of totalitarianism. It was fascinating to me when I talked to teens that this is what I heard:

"Your book is about current topics," one young lady said.

"And why do you think that?" I asked her. I was seriously surprised.

She explained, quite simply. "At the beginning of the book, Viktor and Nadya are listening to the radio. They learn that Germany has attacked their country, and from that moment on, their lives change. This happened, the same thing happened to me, just last week, when I found out from TV that I wasn't expected to go back to school anymore nor to see my friends, since in Italy, the lockdown had started.

*My gosh*, I thought. The girl was right. Her generation is experiencing firsthand how their world can turn upside down in no time, something I learned only by reading books.

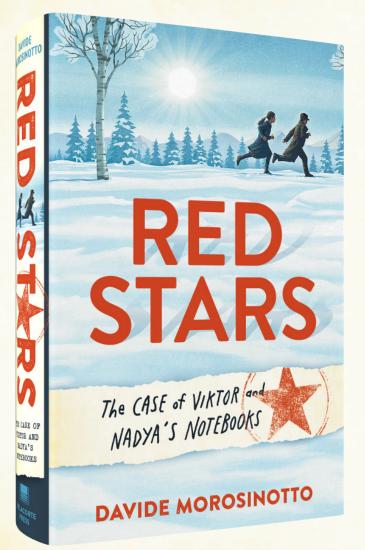
Almost twenty years ago, I studied at the University of Bologna, which is, by the way, the oldest university in the world—almost one thousand years old. I had the opportunity to listen to the lectures of Professor Umberto Eco. He became internationally popular in the 1980s with his thriller novel *The Name of the Rose*. Umberto Eco said: People who don't read, when they are seventy, they'll have lived just one life: their own. Readers will have lived for five thousand years. They will have been present when Cain killed Abel, when Ahab hunted Moby Dick, when Sal Paradise hitchhiked through the US . . . because reading is backward immortality.

To be honest, Eco used examples from Italian literature, but with these you get the idea. I think this is one of the most intelligent things about reading I've ever heard. Backward immortality.

In these strange times of the pandemic, I did my best to avoid books related to viruses. I had already read *The Stand* by Stephen King, *Spillover* by David Quammen, and *The Plague* by Albert Camus. I wasn't interested in works like that now. Instead I read many Lee Child thrillers, Gary Paulsen adventures, Agatha Christie mysteries, adventure novels from China, and books about prehistoric humans. These weren't about current topics, yet they were relevant. They explored human struggles, desires, fears, rebellions, failures, and successes. Even though these characters were distant from me because of their age, the languages they spoke, and the cultures they were born into, we shared the same feelings.

In *On Writing*, Stephen King says, more or less, that reading is a very powerful form of telepathy. I agree with him. In these difficult times, reading is the most powerful way we have to connect, to unite, and to give each other hope. I hope as you follow the twins in Russia, you will share the universal feelings we all experience.





#### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

This middle-grade adventure, told in a unique format that includes diary entries, maps, and photos, takes readers on the harrowing journeys of two twelve-year-old siblings who are separated just before the Nazi siege of their city. Nadya and Viktor are desperate to reunite, but unforeseen challenges ensure that will not be easy.

This fictionalized account of the siege of Leningrad during World War II is a heart-stopping tale of danger and survival against all odds, with an emphasis on the power of truth and what it means to be a hero.

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Bonus: The Ebook edition allows readers to zoom in on maps and other specifics in greater detail.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Davide Morosinotto is a journalist, video game translator, science fiction writer, and children's book author. In 2007, he won the Mondadori Junior Award and published his first book. Since then he has written more than thirty books. He lives in Bologna, Italy.



#### USING HISTORICAL FICTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Historical fiction—writing rooted in fact but freed to take liberties with details can spark invaluable conversations about choices, actions, and consequences, allowing us to explore the road not taken. It is an indispensable interdisciplinary teaching tool that can integrate social studies into English classes, while developing students' independent—thinking skills.

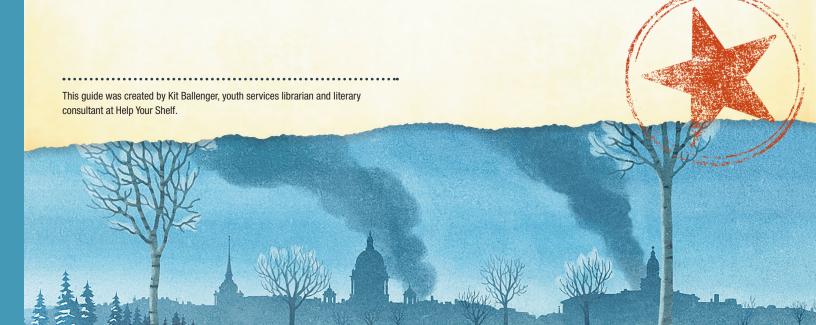
Historical fiction helps us to learn about history and about people and places we can otherwise only imagine. Often action-packed and emotionally resonant, this genre carries shelf appeal for readers of both fact and fiction. Highly versatile, historical fiction encourages us to consider the continuity, change, and context of the events at the heart of each story. Like a time machine, historical fiction transports readers to far-flung locales and days long past. The genre invites us to share experiences about which we might be otherwise unaware and to connect with ordinary people during remarkable times while reveling in their humanity.

At its best, historical fiction is both transportive and immersive for its readers. When a compelling historical event is framed in an accessible way, a connection is forged between the characters and the reader, inviting them to explore someone else's emotional truth, trials, and triumphs while developing empathy with those whose perspectives

may differ greatly from their own. When fictionalized characters are based on real children who experienced struggle and persevered through grueling circumstances, they can guide readers gently through an exercise of emotional growth. Those moments of walking in another's shoes lead us to grow beyond our own experience and to appreciate perspectives that expand our world view.

Recently, the genre of historical fiction has begun to offer readers an opportunity to explore stories beyond the dominant narrative. As you read, it is important to reflect: Whose story is being told? By whom? How is each person's perspective shaped by their attitudes and their beliefs? Whose story is still missing from the narrative? The historical experiences of groups whose stories were long ignored or marginalized raise essential questions about identity and perspective. By raising awareness of these issues, historical fiction invites readers to explore historical sources, past habits, and biases and has the capacity to increase a reader's empathy while developing critical-thinking skills by encouraging readers to ask themselves: How would you have behaved in that era? At that moment?

By reading historical fiction, we become better equipped to reevaluate our present-day attitudes and actions. As readers of historical fiction, we lose ourselves in the past while we learn from it, and we grow in ways that will make the world better.



#### PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- 1. What do you know about World War II? What questions do you have before you begin reading?
- 2. Review the major countries involved in World War II, their geographic proximity to one another, and their political alliances. Group these powers by their affiliations (such as Axis versus Allied powers or dictatorships versus democracies) to help visualize the geopolitical landscape in 1941.
- 3. Discuss what factors cause individuals or groups to differ in their perspectives on and understanding of events and movements.
- 4. Historical fiction is a genre of writing. Make a list of genres you enjoy reading (such as adventure, mystery, or biographies), and consider how those genres might exist simultaneously within works of historical fiction.
- 5. What stories have you read or movies have you watched that are set in this time period and region of the world?

# VOCABULARY/USE OF LANGUAGE

Keep a list of unfamiliar words and terms as you read. Use context clues to write definitions of each. Examples may include *truncheons* (p. 80), *October Revolution* (p. 145), *copse* (p. 214), *untoward* (p. 322), *tendentious* (p. 379), and *redacted* (p. 424). Once you have made an educated guess, look up each unfamiliar word in the dictionary or an encyclopedia. Did you understand the word correctly from its context?

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. *Red Stars* is written as a series of diary entries by twelve-year-old twins, punctuated with reports by a Colonel Smirnov. Novels written as a series of documents are called

- epistolary novels. Have you read an epistolary novel before? Brainstorm what kind of documents the author might use if their story took place in modern times. How would this book be different as a series of text exchanges or social media posts?
- 2. Nadya describes herself and Viktor as "chalk and cheese," meaning their personalities are nothing alike (p. 24). How do you think the twins might have acted had their journeys been switched and had each faced the challenges of the other?
- 3. Under the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, citizens enjoy the right to freedom of speech, which includes the ability to criticize our government. Were the Soviets able to speak freely about their country in 1941? Think of Hermitage employee Mr. Garanin's response to the declaration of war (p. 29) or of Nadya's and Viktor's efforts to keep their diaries private (pp. 39–40). Define and discuss treason (p. 45) and how the standards of public discourse differed between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1941.
- 4. What do you make of the laws Smirnov references in the margins of the notebooks? Do the Soviet laws of 1941 seem fair? For example, although the notebooks were given to the twins, Smirnov deems their possession as "theft of state property . . . punishable with 10 years' imprisonment." (p. 71) Think about the various infractions Smirnov notes throughout the book, from sabotage to theft to the corruption of minors. Do you believe the punishments Smirnov lists are commensurate with the "crimes" described in the notebooks?
- 5. Colonel Smirnov finds the information in the first notebook to be "detailed and reliable." (p. 72) Do you believe Nadya and Viktor are reliable narrators? What factors might make someone's diary entry more or less reliable?



- 6. The children travel great distances before reuniting. Why might people move, voluntarily or involuntary, during a conflict?
- 7. Revisit the conversation between Viktor and the kolkhoz commandant about the newspaper article they read. "So the newspapers tell lies?" Viktor asks. "Oh yes, all the time. They also tell the truth, but it's hidden and you have to dig to find it." (p. 112) What is propaganda? What is rhetoric? How do the two compare? What role do rhetoric and propaganda play during wartime? Do they have a role in times of peace?
- 8. How can an individual decide whom to trust?
  What choices are removed from individual actors during times of conflict? Who or what takes away these choices? Why?
- 9. The story in *Red Stars* is told in a structurally interesting multimedia format. How and why do you think the author settled on using notebooks for his story? How might he have selected the particular images to embed in his story? If you were writing a historical fiction novel and wanted to include artifacts, would you select the artifacts and craft a story around them, or would you write your story first and then locate appropriate images?
- 10. There are three narrators in this story the two main characters and a third voice offstage. How are the three narrators differentiated in the book? What effect does it have on the story to see the events from multiple perspectives? Discuss the author's use of tone and style in the novel, as well as the value of writing a historical fiction narrative using multiple voices. Discuss how alternating between the twins' perspectives informs the reader's understanding of the story and its events. How would the story have differed if only one sibling's experience was shared? What if the whole story was written from a thirdperson perspective, rather than three first-person narrations?

- 11. Russia's winter was brutally cold in 1941, and the environment plays a major role in this story. What do you imagine –30° Celsius (–22° F) *feels* like? How would the extreme cold affect your body? How would the temperature impact your decision-making capabilities and your priorities? Discuss how weather and setting influence the individuals in the book.
- 12. When she returns to Shlisselburg, Nadya is surprised at how normal the German soldiers appear. "I thought to myself that this is what war does: it makes ordinary people do terrible things." (p. 300) Consider how Viktor and Nadya, ordinary children, made difficult choices—perhaps even doing "terrible things"—during the war. How might our concept of good versus evil change in the context of larger conflicts?
- 13. Nadya, Viktor, and other children are part of the Young Pioneers. What similar youth organizations can you think of in the United States? If you were suddenly fleeing a dangerous environment, what skills might you use to keep yourself safe? What tools might come in handy?
- 14. Would you have agreed to the truck trip from Kobona over the frozen lake to Oreshek? (p. 356) Why or why not?
- 15. What would you have done with Franz, the German soldier? What do you think of the ethical dilemma debated by Klara and Nadya? (p. 416)
- 16. Nadya and Viktor navigated and overcame numerous obstacles during their respective journeys. How did adversity affect their relationships with those around them? How did it cause the twins to adapt and change as the story progressed?
- 17. In his author's note, Davide Morosinotto describes *Red Stars* as a "quasi-historical novel." (p. 429) Historical fiction is an interpretive genre. What factors do you think influenced Mr. Morosinotto's interpretation of the historical events underlying the book?

#### **BEYOND THE BOOK & CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS**

- 1. Examine the primary sources in *Red Stars*, including the thirteen maps and various photographs. Explore the resources available through the <u>Prints and Photographs Division</u> and <u>Maps Division</u> of the Library of Congress, then search specifically for images from the Russian Federation in the 1940s. Small groups should select four to six primary documents from the library's databases to interpret, and create a fictional narrative that connects the images together. Present your story to the class.
- 2. Red Stars manipulates primary sources in an unconventional way. As an author of historical fiction, how might you accomplish this without preconceived notions about the materials impacting your work? Analyze the book's image credits, and discuss the resources available to writers who wish to incorporate primary sources into their work.
- **3.** Discuss the epistolary format of *Red Stars* and the use of dialogue in this story. Create a missing diary entry in one of the twin's voices, or synthesize a chapter in a different writing style, such as traditional prose, a text exchange, or in graphic panels.
- 4. Different people experience historical events differently, even when living in the same time and place. Consider Nadya and Viktor's agency. How and why did the twins' actions differ, despite their identical upbringing? How did their personalities help them overcome adversity? What brings out people's ability to endure and overcome extreme hardship? Discuss what actions were available to the twins given the historical moment.
- 5. Fill in the back story of a character in *Red Stars* about whom little is known, such as Dmitry of the barrack-huts (p. 92), the German soldier Fritz, the twins' mother in their absence, or the mysterious Colonel Smirnov.

- Infer character traits based on the evidence in the text, and explain your inferences.
- 6. Analyzing events from more than one point of view is an important skill when interpreting fiction. Klara, Boris, Mikhail, and Anna likely would have had different and very valuable points of view on the story's events. Reframe a chapter from the perspective of a secondary character who played an active role in the plot.
- 7. Illustrate an evocative scene from the book.

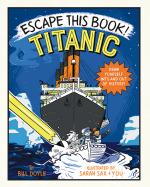
  Moments with strong visual elements
  may include Nadya spying from the tree in
  Shlisselburg or Viktor, Klara, and Mikhail
  navigating the military truck across the expanse
  of frozen Lake Ladoga.
- 8. Nadya and Viktor each went through quite an ordeal. As a group, brainstorm a list of questions you might ask if you were interviewing the twins. Pair up and take turns being the interviewer and the interviewee to answer a few of your lingering questions.
- **9.** Imagine *Red Stars* as a movie. Who would you cast as the major characters? How might you cast Colonel Smirnov, our offstage actor?
- 10. Tell the story of what happened before the book began. What do you think Nadya and Viktor's daily lives were like with their parents in Leningrad? What do you imagine their lives are like after the story ends, when the children are living on the kolkhoz and World War II continues? How is your daily life similar to or different from the children's in *Red Stars*?
- 11. Colonel Smirnov had two choices in reviewing the children's notebooks. Ultimately he decides that "none of the above ever took place," because the facts "cannot be verified." (p. 425) Do you think he believes none of the events happened? Why or why not? What does his decision tell us about authoritarian governments?

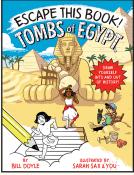
- 12. The social, emotional, and physical impact of armed conflict on children is difficult to fully appreciate. Pair *Red Stars* with another historical fiction novel written from a child's perspective that takes place during World War II to compare and contrast the characters' experiences. Pairings might include *Anna and the Swallow Man*, *What the Night Sings*, or *The Book Thief*.
- 13. It important to look at who is telling a story, who their story benefits, and whose perspective is left out of the story. Why is it important to question sources and consider potential agendas behind information? As you analyze and discuss *Red Stars*, consider what influences your or your class's interpretation of the book.
- **14.** Consider the forms of government represented in the book. How do authoritarian regimes impact freedom of thought, movement, and expression in the story?

- 15. Much of the book is based in fact, but the author took liberties to create the fictional story line. Play a game of two truths and a lie. Research to find two facts about the Soviet Union in 1941. Make up a convincing third statement that is a lie. See if your classmates can sniff out the false statement.
- 16. Viktor and Nadya repeatedly violate their government's codified rules and unwritten social norms in order to survive. How does the twins' behavior compare with what you have read about that of youth in Nazi-occupied France or Germany during World War II? Or with the actions of youth in the midst of other armed conflicts or political turmoil? How do you see Viktor and Nadya's actions in the context of youth resistance today? Discuss the ability of youth to be agents of change.
- 17. Historical fiction generally addresses events that took place twenty years or more before a book is written. How do you think historical resources and evidence differ when authors are considering the events of 1990 versus the events of 1941?



# HISTORICAL FICTION TO USE IN THE CLASSROOM AND RECOMMEND TO READERS



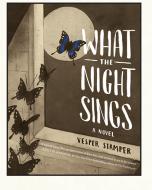




Activity meets adventure in this series that is Choose Your Own Adventure meets I Survived! Doodle, decide, and demolish your way out of history's greatest events!



The story of a young woman paving her own path and falling in love during the Great Plague of 1348.

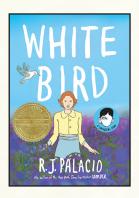


A lushly illustrated novel about a teen Holocaust survivor who must come to terms with who she is and rebuild her life.

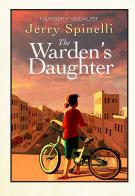




A thrilling and moving story of children who become the key to winning a war.



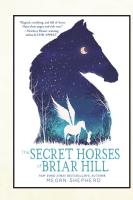
R. J. Palacio, the author of *Wonder*, makes her graphic novel debut with an unforgettable story of the power of kindness and unrelenting courage in a time of war.



From Newbery
Medalist Jerry Spinelli
comes the story of
a girl searching for
happiness inside the
walls of a prison,
which *Kirkus Reviews*called "moving and
memorable" in a
starred review.



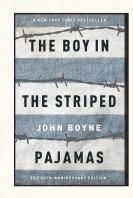
The haunting and poignant story of how a young Japanese girl's understanding of the historic and tragic bombing of Hiroshima is transformed by a memorial lanternfloating ceremony.



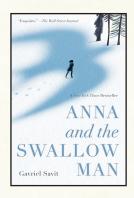
Described as
"reminiscent of
Chronicles of Narnia,"
this moving novel
is a contemporary
classic-in-the-making
that shows readers
there is color in our
world if they know
where to look.

## HISTORICAL FICTION TO USE IN THE CLASSROOM AND RECOMMEND TO READERS





A powerful and unforgettable story that has touched millions of readers around the world.



A stunning, literary, and wholly original debut novel set in Poland during the Second World War.



This is an edge-ofyour-seat reimagining of the romance and tragedy that defined the reign of Henry VIII, told from multiple points of view by award-winning and bestselling authors.



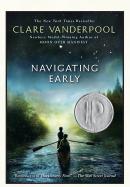
It's just a small story really, about, among other things: a girl, some words, an accordionist, some fanatical Germans, a Jewish fist fighter, and quite a lot of thievery.



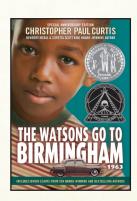
A poignant story filled with heartwarming courage as a young girl takes a harrowing journey to be reunited with her mother.



A riveting and dramatic story of two devoted sisters. Italian citizens, who must survive in World War II Japan.



An Odyssey-like adventure of two boys' incredible quest on the Appalachian Trail.



The Newbery and Coretta Scott King Honoree about a hilarious family on a road trip at one of the most important times in America's history, from the award-winning author of Bud. Not Buddy.

